

The Banished

H. Dyke Walton

**THE SWEEPING SAGA OF A
BOLD FAMILY'S STRUGGLE TO
SURVIVE IN A WORLD OF
BLOOD AND PASSION!**



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SPECIAL
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RESCUED FROM THE FLAMES

After the two kidnappers piled brush at Esther's feet they pulled the murdered man's body toward the stake. "We'll burn them both," one man said. "There won't be any witnesses left."

The other man nodded silently. He reached for his tinder box. He was bending over the dried grass and twigs at the girl's feet when he heard a grunt from his companion.

He looked up and saw the bear-killer, the Russian who had rescued the girl once before. Seeing his friend drop to the ground, his neck twisted and broken, he reached for his sword. He was too late. A boot hit him on the side of his neck and he rolled onto his back. Then he felt himself caught up in the Russian's arms and lifted into the air.

Fighting to save himself, the man caught a glimpse of the sky through the treetops. It was the last thing he ever saw. Kurtsev, the Russian, snapped his back and threw him to the ground.

It took Kurtsev but a moment to free Esther. She threw herself into his arms. He held on to her tightly, wiping the tears from her face, murmuring soft words of comfort.

We are together now, and never ever will I let her be taken from me again, he vowed silently.

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H. Dyke Walton

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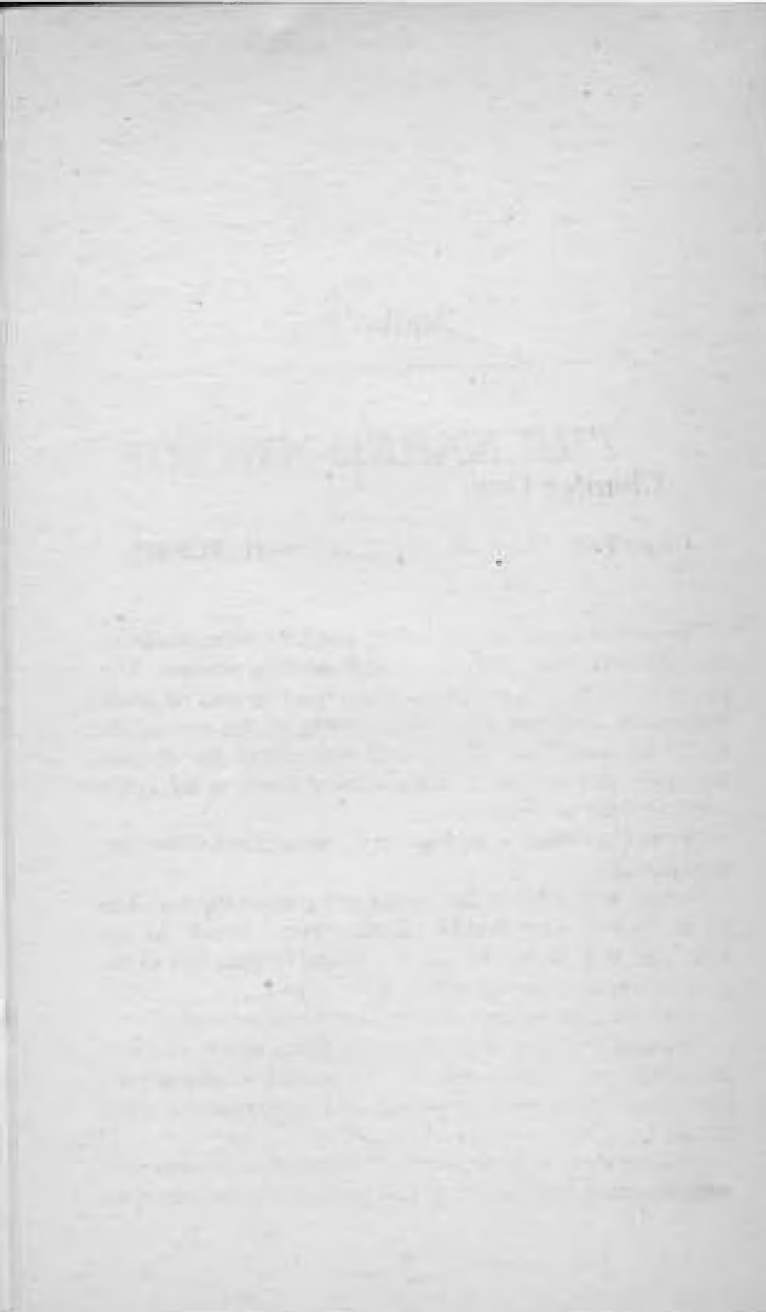
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THE BANISHED

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Book One

THE NAKED SWORD



Chapter One

HARVEST TIME—1708—VORONEZH, RUSSIA

The early August sun reflected against the flashing blades as the two men sparred in their early morning practice. This morning, young Kurtsev Bolinski was sparring with his horse bodyguard. Suddenly above the clashing of the swords, he heard the sound of a horse clattering across the cobbled courtyard, and he went to stand in the doorway as the sentry challenged the horseman to a stop.

"From Czar Peter, a message for Commander Bolinski" the man gasped.

Kurtsev was ahead of the servant and grasped the rein close to the horse's foam-flecked mouth. "Here, friend, let me help," he said, taking the man's arm and helping him to the ground. The courier was barely able to stand.

"I am the commander's son. He will be here shortly."

The man looked up and there was a flicker of admiration in his weary eyes. "I know you, sir. Pardon my weakness but I have been on the road three days and have worn out three horses."

"It's war then, with the Swedes?" Kurtsev's eyes were wide with delighted anticipation. It had been several months since

he had been engaged in fighting and though he enjoyed his homelife, his sister, and the girl Esther, the thought was a delight; especially since his father grew tired of the demands Kurtsev made to exercise with swords, battle-axes and wrestling.

Young Bolinski turned to the three servants. "Have the horse cared for and take this man to quarters and provide him food, and bed."

"Please sir, I must deliver the message." The man's eyes pleaded for understanding. Kurtsev's reputation was that of one who slew the enemy. Standing before him, the man felt small and weak, and he dared not raise his eyes to the red-headed giant before him.

Kurtsev put a hand on his shoulder and there was a smile on his lips. "I understand. My father will be along shortly and I will see that he gets it."

The rider watched as Kurtsev walked to the stairway and looked up toward his father's rooms. The son of the commander was seven feet tall. He was as wide in the shoulders as his father, but was narrow in the hips with longer legs. It was known that his father had schooled him from youth, and that young Kurtsev now had the skill and cunning of a veteran warrior. Father and son had both fought side by side with Czar Peter. Young Kurtsev had shown his courage in every battle. His red hair attracted the great enemy warriors seeking to win fame by killing him. In their attempts, his own fame had grown. Now, at twenty-four, he was a legendary figure. Yes, some day this son would be a commander, like his father, under the czar.

Awakening from a deep sleep, Alexandr heard Kurtsev approaching his quarters. Reluctant to move, he concentrated on Nuala's warm body pressed against him, her mass of brilliant red hair spread across his chest. Next to him, her frame diminished and she looked like a child, not like the woman who had borne him three children—a son and two daughters. His son Kurtsev was now a young giant of a man. The couple also had two beautiful daughters, one married and now like a bubble, preparing to present them with a child of her own soon. Oh, that would be a great event! Nonetheless he was

sobered at the realization that he, Alexandr Bolinski, would soon be a grandfather.

Finally, unable to delay his rising any longer, he slid carefully out of bed, taking care not to disturb the early-morning sleep his wife considered the best part of her night. He went to stand naked before the golden-framed pier glass mirror and stretched his arms and massive muscles, inspecting his body marred by the ugly scars of wounds too often ignored in the heat of battle.

The wounds had healed, though sometimes they gave him pain and sleepless nights. He flexed his muscles but knew they had lost some of their vigor. As he ran his fingers through his thick curly hair, he noted that it was streaked with gray. He stared into his own eyes covered by heavy eyebrows, eyes that could flash angry fire and yet be tender and compassionate with those he loved. I am too old for front-line duty, he thought angrily. I would now prefer staying on my own land by my wife's side. He shrugged his shoulders at these thoughts of weakness. Briskly he turned his thoughts to that of his first duty, loyalty to his country and to the Czar Peter.

Alexandr looked again at his wife Nuala, daughter of a Scottish chieftain who had sent her as a child to friends in Voronezh for safety. She, Nuala, was one of the three ruling passions of his life; she and the children she had borne him. His love of his country and its ruler, Czar Peter, was second. He was by instinct and preference a warrior and one of Peter's most trusted commanders. Closely following was his affection for his land, an affection which lent him a farmer's tolerance for the vagaries of nature.

He went to stand at the window and felt a glow of pleasure as his eyes looked across his vast fields of grain as far as his eyes could see. The wheat moved with the air like undulating water on the restless early morning air. His fields extended eastward to the River Don and he knew that the barges of Solomon ben Adhem were riding high on the current, their empty holds waiting soon to be filled with his grain. His eyes searched for the workers that would start harvesting this day.

Alexandr slipped a pure silk robe over his shoulders then held the sleeve to his nose. The fragrance of the eastern worlds was pleasant in his nostrils. The robe was a gift from Solomon ben Adhem who had recently returned from the Far East with a

rich cargo in the bulging holds of his ship. He thought fondly of Solomon's daughter Esther who had carried the robe to him the last time she visited his own little Katya. They were both seventeen and close friends, despite the growing antagonism toward the Jews. He loved Esther as a daughter and the thought of the unreasoning resentment against her and her family always angered him.

He pushed his feet into sandals then passed close to his bed. His eyes softened as he looked down upon his wife. He then stood for a reverent moment in front of the icon on the wall, before quietly leaving the bedchamber to see the messenger below.

As he descended the wide-curved stairway to the outer entry hall, Alexandr listened to the excited whisperings of the servants as they went about performing their duties. He was met by his son as he reached the last step. Kurtsev grinned and nodded.

Father and son stood together in the entry hall and all conversation around them ceased as they opened the czar's packet. Together they walked to the window to read Peter's instructions, Kurtsev peering over his father's shoulder and squinting a little to decipher the script:

"To: Commander Alexandr Bolinski:

"Greetings, my friend. Sweden's Charles XII within one hundred miles of Moscow with thirty thousand men. Our situation is desperate. All companies are ordered to strengthen our position. Lead your forces here in all haste. Peter."

"Kurt, notify our captains that our men must be ready to march by sunup tomorrow," Alexandr said firmly. He paused and looked out of the window at the early morning sun which shone on the golden heads of grain that covered the sweep of his land as far as the eye could see. His son followed his gaze. "This is not a good time to strip our city of all its men," Alexandr added with a touch of worry. "Only our women, old men and boys will be here to harvest our wheat onto Solomon ben Adhem's waiting barges."

"Are you worried about Count Mikhail Dolgorsky, father? Surely he will go to Moscow also?" Kurtsev asked.

"The count aspires to the throne," Alexandr said slowly, his face dark with concern. "Mikhail Dolgorsky has requested that you and I attend a banquet with him tonight, my son," he added thoughtfully. "Perhaps we can persuade him to join our forces to bring relief to Peter in Moscow. I don't like leaving our city defenseless, and I don't trust Dolgorsky."

"Could we split our forces?" Kurtsev wondered out loud. "I could go to Moscow with part of our command, and you could stay here to defend the city and see that the wheat is harvested and loaded on Solomon's barges."

Had there been a choice Alexandr would have taken his son's advice, but he turned and faced Kurtsev with a stern countenance, speaking sharply. "You know where my duty lies, as does your own." Then his face softened as he put his arm across Kurtsev's broad shoulder. "We will stay together, my son. The crops will be harvested and loaded on Solomon's barges by our own loyal and good people."

"Did I hear my father's name spoken?" Esther interrupted, entering the hall with Katya. Both girls were laughing and their faces shone with an early morning glow.

"How handsome you look in your new robe from Solomon, father!" Katya quipped, standing on her toes to kiss his cheek. She stroked the silk with obvious pleasure and laid her head against his chest as he hugged her warmly.

Esther looked shyly up at Kurtsev who towered above her. "Kurtsev, I'll have father bring you a robe on his next trip from India if you'd like." She wanted his attention and yet was embarrassed by it.

Kurtsev cupped her chin in his hand and watched the color come and go. The fan of her lashes moved down against her soft cheeks. She is turning into a beautiful woman—and soon her father would arrange a suitable marriage for her. His grip tightened and her eyes flowed up to meet the depths of his. His grip loosened and he laughed lightly. *I'd like that, little one*, he thought softly to himself. She was his—if he wanted her. But a Jewess! He'd think on it—after the coming battle.

She turned away to Alexandr. "Sir, father is letting me go with him on his next voyage. Would it be possible for Katya to come with us? I know my family would be honored to have her along."

"Did I hear our Katya being invited to go on a sea voyage?" Nuala asked, stepping onto the stair landing as a shaft of sunlight burst through the plate-glass window and turned her hair to living flame. Alexandr stepped forward to take her outstretched hand, and she raised her eyebrows as if in despair at her family's exuberance.

"Oh please, mama! Please may I go?" Katya begged, a child again because it suited her purposes. The family, although thoroughly familiar with her artifices, knew she would win.

"It's several weeks away, Katya dear." Nuala smiled indulgently. "There is time for us to give it some thought." Nuala's mind had focused on the dispatch she saw in her husband's hand and she noticed the troubled look in his eyes. "You two girls run along to breakfast," she said quietly. "Our table is being set out on the terrace; see that all is ready." She gave them each a smile as they went, talking excitedly of their sea voyage and of the handsome young men they would meet.

Nuala waited until they were out of hearing before she turned back to her son and husband. "I see by your eyes you have bad news, Alex," she said gently. "What is it? What has happened, my dear?"

"We have orders to march to Moscow, Nuala," her husband said, his face grim. "Kurtsev has already sent word to our captains. We march at daybreak to fight with Peter against Charles and his Swedes." He saw the alarm in his wife's startled eyes as he felt her small hand tighten on his arm. His eyes pleaded for understanding as he turned to pace the floor. "They are already within a hundred miles of Moscow."

Nuala put out her hands to stop his pacing. "Oh, Alexandr, another battle!" Her breath exploded softly. She paused, then added desperately, "Voronezh is our permanent home, but if you leave the city unprotected, we may not have a home at all. And what of our crops? Who will harvest them?"

Kurtsev turned back to them from the window. "I suggested to father that he stay here with half of our forces. That would give the city protection and the men would harvest the wheat."

"If Charles takes Moscow and the czar is killed or captured, the Swedes will sweep down the River Don and take our city anyway," Alexandr said impatiently. "Voronezh is the gateway

to the Black Sea. We build the best ships in Russia and our rich wheatlands alone are worth the risk for any conqueror."

"Your father is right," Nuala said, straightening her shoulders and standing beside her husband. "Those of us left here are not entirely helpless. We will do what needs to be done." She smiled at her two men. "Get dressed, please, while I make sure breakfast is ready for you. You have a busy day ahead."

Her husband and son looked at her with pride. Though they had long been aware of her strength, it never ceased to fill them with renewed love and pride. They carried its memory with them when they ploughed, held on to it when they harvested, and wore it like a shield into battle.

It was late afternoon by the time the soldiers—swords belted and carrying lances, battle-axes, shields and knives—gathered at the garrison outside of the city. Commander Alexandr Bolinski looked with pride at the banners flying over his two thousand mounted men, thirty-five hundred foot soldiers, and more than two hundred officers and their attendants. The mounted men were veterans, and even most of the foot soldiers had seen combat under Bolinski's banner. All of them were regularly trained. The supplies, kept stocked in readiness, had been loaded into wagons while Alexandr and Kurtsev spent the day with the troops.

When preparations were completed the officers assembled for instructions and Alexandr addressed them. "You heard the order from our Czar Peter this morning," he began. "Three more messengers have since arrived, each one urging us to bring speedy relief. You must use the remaining daylight to move toward Moscow while Kurtsev and I remain here to obey Count Dolgorsky's command. We will be delayed but a few hours. We will rendezvous with you at night camp."

He paused to be sure his next words were accorded their full quota of importance. "Regardless of what circumstances arise, you are to proceed with all haste to Moscow, and report to Czar Peter."

The officers came to attention, saluted and left to take command of their troops. Alexandr and his son sat astride their war horses, watching as their army moved out. Families stood

quietly aside, watching their fathers and brothers and sons leave for yet another bloody battlefield, their tears stemmed by the courage which would see them through the harvest. They, too, had a job to do.

The Bolinskis waited until the streets were deserted before they returned home. Once there, they prepared carefully for the meeting with Count Dolgorsky, making sure each part of their elaborate officer's uniform was in perfect order. Nuala watched her husband dress and listened to his plans, trying to show no sign of the sense of foreboding she had been feeling all day.

"I am leaving five men to guard you, my wife," he said. "I have sent a carriage for Isanka, our sweet daughter who looks like a bubble. She will be here shortly. It is important, Nuala, to keep our daughters at home until I return."

Nuala walked down the stairs at her husband's side, her face showing only absolute tranquility. She kissed her tall son who lifted her from her feet and whirled her around, and they all laughed at her slight dizziness when he let her down. She stood against her husband to regain her equilibrium, holding her hair off her face to cool herself.

For the first time Kurtsev noticed a few gray hairs in amongst the red. The thought of his mother growing old shocked him into realizing he was no longer a small boy who could sit on her knee while she taught him Scottish songs. As a young man he had whirled her around on the dance floor until he tired—suddenly a turn or two made her dizzy.

He looked at his father and saw he, too, was getting old, too old for these long, hard rides and the danger and strain of the battlefield. He suddenly felt the hurt all children feel the first time they admit their parents' mortality. He vowed to somehow keep his father from front-line exposure, knowing it was time to relinquish the thrill of standing by his side, sword and shield almost touching as they prepared for hand-to-hand combat. Kurtsev remembered the sharing of steel upon steel and felt again the unity of watching together as lines gave way and men fell to the stroke of their blades. He knew it would never be again.

He saw the same realization in the face of his father as he clasped his wife in his arms and he accepted it out of his love for

them both. His anger rose at men's greed to possess more land, and captives, and power. There had to be another way to live, he thought, than the constant seeking after the fruit of other men's labors. He stored the idea away for future contemplation, however, for to belabor it now would make leaving too difficult to bear, and leave he must.

He gave his mother one last kiss, his father did the same, and together they went to their waiting horses—two powerful, matched bays, pawing the ground and anxious to be on the road. Climbing into their saddles, their massive frames dwarfing the fifteen-hundred-pound war horses, the Bolinskis ordered their mounts into a mile-eating gallop with which the ten soldiers behind them were hard put to keep up. Two hours later they passed through the guarded gates of Count Dolgorsky's country residence.

Count Mikhail Dolgorsky's home was a fortress, despite his carefully cultivated air of country gentleman. The smoke of small cooking fires in the distance was, to Alexandr's practiced eye, evidence of as many as three or four thousand troops and he was not surprised to find officers' quarters and stables near the main house.

When the stable hands had taken their horses, Kurtsev said softly, "Those men were Kalmuks, Father."

"We had best inform the Count," Alexandr responded grimly, presuming Dolgorsky to be unaware that he had enemies of the czar in his employ. He will be in our debt, the older Bolinski thought, walking behind a servant into the great hall and followed closely by Kurtsev and their ten guards.

They were greeted by several wolfhounds that sniffed at their boots. A profusion of candles lit the walls and tables, but their glow fell short of the high beamed ceilings, lending the room the feeling of a deep cavern. The walls were hung with shields and swords, lances and knives and armor and coats of arms. Long velvet drapes partly covered colorful, stained glass windows which might otherwise have warmed the room's cavelike atmosphere. A huge fireplace was centered between two main posts which supported heavy roof beams and a plank table and benches extended across the center of the room. Two upholstered chairs headed the table, one of them carved on the back with the count's coat of arms. Alexandr knew it well! It

was an ancient crest worn on the saddle of those dedicated to sweeping the country free of hiding Jews. Since they use dogs to sniff them out, Alexandr thought contemptuously, the broom and dog crest is appropriate.

A servant came, beckoned to Alexandr and Kurtsev to accompany him through a studded oak door and into a study where he announced, "Alexandr Bolinski and his son, Kurtsev Bolinski," before closing the door quietly behind him.

The count rose to his feet. "Alexandr and Kurtsev, old friends and comrades," he said in greeting. "It seems we are about to go into battle together." He pointed to a dispatch lying on his desk. "Sit down and we will discuss our plans." He motioned them toward a chair and poured from a decanter into glasses set on a tray. "Whiskey from our rye which grows so abundantly on the plains north of the Volga," he said as he poured. "But you, being successful farmers, would know more than I about the crops. How is your wheat crop this year?"

He seemed friendly and sincere, a good host, but Kurtsev felt uneasy. Perhaps I'm oversensitive because of the tensions of the day, he thought, examining the count's bulky face—a face that seemed unfinished, coarse, and flabby. He had immense eyebrows, small eyes and a rounded nose, with a wide mouth and nervous lips blended into sagging bearded jowls. His black hair hung to his shoulders, hiding a fat neck that did nothing to relieve his stockiness.

"I received this dispatch this morning," the count said, picking up the dispatch with his broad stubby fingers. "It seems Peter wants my forces to follow you into Moscow. I have to presume he wants me along, and of course I intend to do my part." He smiled, handing the paper to Alexandr. "It seems you are a little better prepared than I," he went on. "I hear your troops have already started. Mine will be ready by daylight to follow yours."

While Alexandr was reading the dispatch, the count turned his attention to Kurtsev. "I hear you are still the undefeated champion of our trade fair—at least in Kurak. Have you ever thought of going to Tekhvin to challenge the winner at the St. Petersburg Fair?"

"Yes, your Highness, I have given it much thought, but crops, wars, and family allow little time for such digressions."

"Well, I look forward to seeing you perform. I've heard good reports on your strength and ability."

The servant reappeared to announce dinner and stood aside as the three men passed him to make their way to the table. Chairs and benches were pulled back and the count and his guests prepared to sit, scaring the rats from their feeding of table scraps and sending them racing to their holes in the baseboards. The count encouraged the wolfhounds to catch the rodents, but the dogs merely barked and snapped until the creatures were gone.

Soon the large plank table groaned under the heavy trays of food borne in by waiters. The overabundance left little time for serious conversation. Large silver goblets were kept full of Volga rye whiskey, and as the cups were refilled, the talk and laughter grew louder. Hounds snarled and fought over scraps of food and bones tossed to them from the table and Alexandr and Kurtsev, neither of them heavy drinkers, were repeatedly encouraged to drain their goblets. The Bolinskis ate slowly and accepted only small portions, but the count seemed delighted to have these distinguished guests eat and drink with him. He smiled and laughed at their comments, but Kurtsev observed that his eyes were cold, ice cold.

The ten soldiers belonging to Alexandr's guard mingled with an equal number of the count's household guests and became very noisy, so that it was increasingly difficult to speak and be heard. Alexandr found himself leaning close to the count's ear to speak to him about the Kalmuk stable man. "Have you effected a peace with some of those people?" he asked.

The count turned from the table and emptied his mouth of food, spewing it toward one of the dogs. The animal gave him a baleful stare and proceeded to lick it up while Dolgorsky washed his mouth out with whiskey. "Alexandr Bolinski, Commander Alexandr Bolinski," he said, having swallowed the whiskey and raising his goblet. "You will soon see the truce I have made with the Kalmuks and the Bashkirs." He laughed, as if at some private joke. Gulping another draught of whiskey, he took a deep breath and screamed a Bashkir battle yell which was followed by a second of deathly silence as his signal rose to the dark beams high in the ceiling.

Waiters, carefully stationed behind Alexandr, Kurtsev and

their guards, took but an instant to thrust their knives deep into the backs of these honored guests. Kurtsev, however, had moved quickly at the count's signal, and was on his feet before he could be struck. He saw a war ax-handle come down on his father's head but was powerless to stop the blow.

Young Bolinski tore a war ax from the hands of the man behind him and, knowing there was no time to raise it, put it to use as a butting instrument to crush the skull of his attacker. The man dropped to the floor and Kurtsev gained enough space to swing the ax about—four men died.

Suddenly a spear, thrown across the room, caught Kurtsev unaware. It glanced off the side of his head and knocked him to the floor. The count scurried out of the safe shadows of the room, his fat wet lips trembling with pleasure at the success of his plan. He stepped over the bodies of the two Bolinskis and sought his goblet in order to raise a toast to his own brilliance.

Chapter Two

Nuala and her daughters ate a light supper and told the servants to feed themselves and the guards after lighting a fire in the parlor. The three women sat together, sipping cocoa and enjoying the quiet moments of intimacy that usually preceded bed. The servants had moved their chairs closer to the fire and their cheeks glowed in the firelight. Katya did not need a fire to put blush in her cheeks; she had the kind of natural high coloring no amount of flame or rouge could emulate.

"I'm so excited about your baby," she said to her sister. "Will it be a boy or a girl, do you think?" It was customary to hope for a boy as firstborn, but Isanka, who had no such preference, merely shrugged.

"Mother, how could you bear to have three children?" she asked softly, moving in her chair to balance her large belly. "I feel so awkward and unattractive. I can't believe Sergei wants to look at me." She sighed, adding, "but he says I'm beautiful because I'm carrying his child. I'll be glad when it's over."

"It will be over before you know and you'll quickly forget the discomfort you're feeling now when you hold your child in your

arms. Each one of you were special to your father and me—I can't imagine being without any one of you."

"Do you think our men will be gone for long, mother?" Katya asked more soberly. "Esther and her father will be ready to sail within days, but I don't want to leave you if father isn't back."

"Is Moses going too?" Nuala asked, knowing Esther's ten-year-old brother would be heartbroken if he was left behind. She looked surprised when her daughter shook her head. Moses was a late-comer in the ben Adhem family and she could not imagine his not wanting to go along since he usually got what he wanted.

"Esther says Moses has already begun studying for his Bar Mitzvah and his father doesn't want him to interrupt his Hebrew studies," Katya said.

Nuala was one of the few gentiles who understood the meaning of a Bar Mitzvah and it suddenly made sense that young Moses would not be sailing with his father. "It will all work out just fine," she said, in response to her daughter's earlier question. "Don't worry your pretty head about it. Now it's late and I want you both to go to sleep. I'd like you to sleep with me—we can look after each other and besides I don't want to be by myself." She took one of Isanka's hands and Katya took the other, and they laughingly pulled her from her chair.

"I'm so big, mama, it must be a boy who'll be as big as Kurtsev someday," Isanka groaned.

A sudden draft swept across the floor, fanning the flames in the fireplace and stirring the ashes. Nuala had instructed the servants to shut and bolt all the doors and shutter the windows. There could be no draft unless a door or window had been opened somewhere. With all the trouble in the country—and with the men gone it was not surprising that a frisson of fear ran through her. She hurried toward the hall door, but was too late. She was stopped in her tracks by a wild terrifying cry, the cry of a barbarian crazy with blood lust. Frozen into immobility, she stared at the closed door, waiting for it to open.

She did not have long to worry, but it was enough time for terrifying memories. She recalled Scotland, and her mother and family, murdered before her eyes in the last of a series of

clan wars that left her alone with her father. Now, with two daughters behind her in the shadows, she watched a mob of screaming Kalmuks and Bashkirs charge through the door with burning torches held aloft. The screams of women servants reached her ears from the courtyard. She stood paralyzed as the savages raced through the house, temporarily ignoring the three women in their search for valuables.

When a hoarse shout from the hall heralded the entrance of a veritable giant, Nuala came to life. She saw that the man was heavily bearded and that his leather coat and sword were stained with fresh blood. It matched the stain on a huge sword he carried easily in his enormous hand. The man's voice rose loud and vulgar in praise of those who were dragging in the bodies of dead guards and servants past the women and into the center of the room. Loot was collected and piled at his feet. Smoke crept down the stairway from the upper floor which was in flames.

When the giant finally seemed satisfied with his bounty, he turned to examine the women, evaluating them as he would animal stock ready for slaughter. His eyes stripped them naked as he strode toward them, unconcerned by their terror even when Isanka crumpled to the floor in a faint. Nuala dropped to her knees to help her daughter, at the same time slipping a small Scottish dagger from a boot. The bearded giant grabbed her hair, lifting her to her feet. The blood on his hands matched her red hair and his strength far outstripped hers, but it troubled him that the terror in the woman's eyes had been replaced by a defiance and pride he had never seen on the face of a captive female.

Angrily her attacker let go of Nuala's hair and encircled her waist to pull her toward him. It took him a moment to comprehend the pain as she leaned closer to him and buried the dagger into the closest layer of muscle she could reach. He shoved her to the floor, pulled the knife contemptuously from his belly and threw it beside her. Then he raised his great sword and sliced it through her body, his roar of anger and pleasure close upon each other. He did the same to the unconscious Isanka and, ignoring his wound, turned his attention to the loot being gathered into sacks and hauled from the burning

building. He did not see Katya, unconscious, being dragged into the courtyard, nor did he care that the stench of burning bodies was only the beginning of what was to follow.

Solomon ben Adhem was alone with his daughter Esther and his youngest son Moses. Their mother had died when Moses was an infant and of his three other sons, two had gone to fight with Peter against the invader, Charles of Sweden, and one was abroad on their ship.

"Father," Esther called out from her perch on a window seat, "there's a fire over the city. What can it mean?"

Solomon paled and looked outside, hoping what his daughter saw was merely a fire and not more of what he had seen so much of during his lifetime. Like every other Jew he was startled by a knock on the door in the middle of the night and alarmed by strangers on their street. A widespread fire in the city could only mean one thing—the same thing—the thing that he feared and prayed daily to his God to prevent.

"The Kalmuks and Bashkirs are looting and burning our town. Save yourselves!" a countryman shouted from the streets and, his worst fears confirmed, he looked immediately for a means of escape for his two children. But the warning came too late. Men fell under flailing hoofs as mounted tribesmen charged down the streets, their horses' hoofs raising a cloud of dust.

Realizing he either had time to run or shutter the windows, Solomon bolted the door, snuffed the candle and pushed his terrified children into a closet before he took down his sword. As a sea captain he had fought his way through many battles against those who would have stolen his ship and its cargoes, including pirates on the high seas who had learned to respect his sword and his skill. His sword was four feet of the finest polished steel that craftsmen could make. He prided himself on keeping its edge razor sharp and its point as narrow as the dagger Nuala had sunk into her intruder's body.

The instant the door burst open, as he knew it must, and a burning torch came crashing into the room, Solomon ben Adhem's sword started its deadly swing. The first unlucky ruffian was instantly decapitated and those who followed him, quickly met the same fate.

Twelve men lay dead before a spear entered Solomon's back and penetrated his body. The point of the spear stuck out several feet. Calmly ben Adhem broke off its point, and thrust it through the heart of a man whose only purpose was to escape from the room which was rapidly being consumed by fire. It was the Jew's final gesture, for he at last fell forward into the flames, his hands outstretched toward the closet where he had hoped his children were safely hidden. His tears were for them, not himself.

One last savage, left alive in the room and knowing of ben Adhem's wealth, assumed Solomon was stretching toward his riches. Out of greed he braved the flames and, upon opening the closet, discovered the two children, their arms about each other. He lifted his sword, but something touched a latent chord of decency in him and he led them into the street to join the other captives.

Chapter Three

Kurtsev remembered little about the events that followed the blow which rendered him unconscious. He vaguely recalled being dragged into a dungeon and had a sense of having spent a restless night cradling his father's head in his lap. When daylight arrived, he rose to his feet to find he was able to look through the dungeon window without effort because of his seven-foot height. Through the clearing night mist he could distinguish scaffolds lining the road leading out of the city to the plains beyond. They created the illusion of an orchard, each tree bearing, in place of fruit, the body of a Jew. Men and women, broken on the wheel, lay stacked like cordwood; they were only half alive. Thus, none could object as men with wagons gathered their remains in preparation for the new day's executions. These workers breathed in the stench of their fellow countrymen, roasted on huge grill fires.

Kurtsev could barely retain his tears or his vomit; in his twenty-four years he had often been to war and thus had been touched by its horror. But he had never seen such wholesale, purposeless mutilation and destruction. He knew many Jews

had been killed during the sacking of the village the night before; he could not know this second day of executions was but the beginning of the destruction of sixty thousand Jews whose only crime was the worship of a particular God. He turned away from the window and watched his father rise wearily to his feet. His clothes, like Kurtsev's, were torn and bloody, and flesh wounds showed on his arms and shoulders.

"Don't look, father," Kurtsev pleaded as his father moved toward the window.

"Will my not looking change anything?" Alexandr asked bitterly, turning away from the window because he knew what he would find.

"Let us concentrate on getting out of here," Kurtsev responded. "Mother, Katya and Isanka must be our first consideration. Solomon and his children . . ." His voice trailed off at the sight of his father's bleak face. "My little Esther . . ." his face was pale.

"I'm afraid there is no hope that any Jews have escaped this pogrom," the older man said softly. "Our own sweet girls . . ." He hit one palm into the other and tried grimly to gather his thoughts. "There is small hope that Nuala and the girls have escaped. If Count Dolgorsky would attack me, one of Peter's commanders, he is in a secure position. I fear for the czar if the count is not stopped, but—as you say—we must think first of our own. Right now, however, we cannot even help ourselves."

"There is a way out of here, Father," Kurtsev said slowly, reluctant to share what he had done for fear his father would disapprove. "Early this morning Dolgorsky issued a challenge. I am to fight a bear to the death. If I win we can both go free. I had no alternative. I have already accepted his challenge."

Alexandr looked long and gravely at his son. Gripping the younger man's shoulder with a hand weakened by the wound in his chest, he said, "Your acceptance of Mikhail Dolgorsky's challenge is noble, but we should not cloud our minds with hope that the count will keep his promise. I have no hope myself of coming out of this alive. I also fear our family is no more, but you must live to escape. If you do live, go to the czar and warn him that Mikhail is a traitor. Peter will surely revenge

us by loosing a stream of blood that runs from Voronezh to Moscow. I am humiliated to think that such a simple trap cost us so dearly. More than that I fear this fight will be your last."

"No man has yet survived an encounter with the count's wild mountain bear," Kurtsev said softly, "but it will be better to die fighting than to be tortured and broken in captivity. I will gain strength through your prayers, and I will myself call upon the God of our fathers that I might live to lead our forces to victory."

Kurtsev took his father in his arms and they said no more, for there was little left unsaid. Each of them mourned in silence the days of the past. The future was no more, for they worried for wife, mother, sisters and friends whom they were powerless to aid. Later, a guard shoved a bowl of foul-smelling soup through a small iron door in the lower part of their dungeon and they shared it as they had shared their sadness and their hope.

They had seen victims' bodies sliced like meat and thrown into cauldrons of boiling water as food for the prisoners, but they ate the rancid broth because they had a purpose in staying alive. They listened to the heavy tread of soldiers' feet crossing the paved courtyard; they heard the shuffling of prisoners' feet mingle with sobbing and coughing and murmurings; and they deafened themselves to the screams of those being broken on the wheel, lashed by the whip or roasted over newly-lit flames.

They tried to steel themselves against watching, and stop their ears against hearing, but Kurtsev's keen ears caught the sound of his name in a girl's dying scream. His father blocked the path to the window and held him until the screams subsided. Sweat poured down his body and his eyes filled with hatred, rage, and anger against his enemies. Finally the young man dropped to his knees in the dirt, sobbing like a baby. Alexandr relaxed his tense muscles in a manner which indicated total hopelessness. Another pitiful scream rose above the raucous laughter of the soldiers and Kurtsev threw himself against the iron door with a suddenness that caught Alexandr off guard. "Save your strength and anger for combat, my son," he called out. "We cannot both die in this cell."

His son turned around and saw, not his strong proud father,

but an old man begging him to survive in the sure knowledge of his own impending death.

"Your survival is all that matters to me now," Alexandr Bolinski said softly. "Remember well the things that I have taught you and that the words embellished on our shield are *Familia Invictus*. Let our family indeed be invincible and teach as I have taught you, my son."

Kurtsev's strong fingers combed his thick red hair from his face; without a cord to hold it in place, it hung over his shoulders. His satin breeches and velvet shirt, missing their customary long sash, hung torn and ragged about his body and his sandals were laced up over the calves of his legs. Still he stood straight and tall as the iron bolt that held their door secure slid back and guards, armed with spears, pikes, and axes, called him to come forward. Ignoring their impatience for the games to start, he gripped his father's arms and listened calmly to Alexandr Bolinski's final gift of words, "Whether or not we meet again, hold fast to this thing—no matter what we have witnessed here, nothing can stop the human soul from reaching for freedom. Justice will overcome oppression as long as men like you keep your resolves high. We have been together for twenty-four years and each year you have brought greater honor to me. Now my body is defeated and tired, but I give you my love and strength to take with you. God bless you, my dearest son."

Kurtsev, surrounded by armed guards, felt a noose being slipped over his head. When the rope was jerked tight around his throat, only the sharply pointed spears prodding his body kept his temper in check. The guard holding the rope-end stayed well behind his prisoner, holding to him tightly as they moved through the huge courtyard. A carnival atmosphere hung in the air—the freak show's torture and hanging exhibitions extended more than a mile down the main street. The wheel and the roasting grills were best attended and crowds of interested onlookers circled the dying captives. Still the red-haired man being led by the soldiers with a rope around his head drew their attention and his great height and powerful

body drew envious looks from men and women alike. Diverted from the other prisoners, they moved aside and made a path, watching as he was ushered to the brink of a pit arena built expressly for combat between man and beast. The pit was no more than a hundred feet long by seventy-five feet wide. It had a dirt floor and the sides were shored by heavy upended planks which were buried in the ground. The upper ends of the planks opened to bleachers surrounding the arena, one row above the other, so that several hundred people could have a clear view of the combat. All seats were filled except for an area partitioned off and reserved for Count Dolgorsky and his guests who would take their pleasure in upholstered and cushioned chairs.

Kurtsev was led down a passageway under the bleachers and through a plank door into the arena. His shirt was torn from his back, but he was allowed to keep his breeches and sandals. He tested the ground. It was soft. He knew that with sandals on he could easily slip, so he took them off and threw them after the departing guards. The one who had removed the rope from his neck looked back at him evilly. He spat deliberately and accurately at him and said, "My name is Talin. I'll enjoy watching the bear tear you to shreds. You killed one of my brothers." He then made his way up into the stands.

Confidence drained from Kurtsev as he viewed the enormous size of his opponent. He had seen bears before in a circus, but they had not been monsters like those which had been taken as cubs from the high cold regions in the Ural Mountains. Kept in captivity, tormented, and fed only raw meat, they grew to enormous proportions and could rise to a height of over ten feet when standing on their hind legs. There were several bears at the far side of him, penned behind iron bars. One was bloodied and still eating the flesh of his last victim, while others were snarling and pawing, trying to reach the fresh meat that they craved because they had not been fed their last two meals.

The head of each bear was twice the size of Kurtsev's, and their claws extended longer than his fingers. Their teeth were like pointed spear heads and saliva ran from the sides of their mouths as Kurtsev approached and they caught his scent. They

turned their attention toward him and the snarls emerging from the deep recesses of their huge chests shook the ground beneath him. He tried to concentrate on all that his father had told him about bears, but there was little to remember about his powerful enemies except that eyesight was their one weakness and scent their greatest strength.

Kurtsev's hands were sweaty and his knees felt weak, but he walked away from the cages with the proudest stance he could muster. Men were working in the ring, raking and carrying out the remains of the last combatants, and the crowd was not unruly. Watching victims being tortured and killed stirred their baser instincts, but they felt the horror and thrill of a real contest about to begin and acknowledged this by their silence. They respected the courage of the man about to take on one of nature's most ferocious beasts with no weapon but his own hands. There was no pleasure in it when the victim cringed, but they sensed that this man was different and readied themselves for a real sporting event.

In the hush that came over the crowd, Kurtsev glanced up and saw the royal party entering their box, assisted by servants. Small tables were placed around them, refreshments brought in and greetings exchanged with the crowd before the count called for Kurtsev to approach him. "Kurtsev, son of Alexandr Bolinski, your family has been punished for their disloyalty to our great Czar Peter. You are about to be given a chance to prove yourself. If you can win in this personal combat, you have my word that you and your father and your mother and sisters will have your freedom."

Kurtsev wanted to shout, "Show me my mother and sister," but he caught a knowing look from the count's woman companion who unconsciously gave the lie to the count's statement. They are dead, Kurtsev thought, but I am alive and intend to remain that way. He cleared his mind of all things and concentrated purely on the battle ahead as, at a signal from the count, the animal keeper opened the door of the cage. The huge bear came ponderously forward, squinting up at the shafts of sunlight penetrating the timbers of the roof. He sniffed at the bloodstains that darkened the ground, his little pig ears sorting sounds while the crowd sat in silence, looking

back and forth from man to beast. Suddenly a rock hit the bear and he turned like a cat, striking out at his unseen adversary, the flash of his extended claws like a streak of light.

A few spectators called out for action and someone threw a coat into the ring. There were cheers and shouts as the bear pounced on it and, holding it with its teeth, ripped it apart with sharp claws. Then it caught Kurtsev's scent and moved forward to where the young man stood, rising on its hind legs and walking forward with slow, deliberate movements. The crowd was still silent, and the only sounds were those from outside the stadium. Kurtsev, moving like a dancer, circled to his right, hardly pausing as he scooped up the shredded coat and a layer of dirt. He held the garment firmly in his hand when the bear went down on all fours and charged. Knowing it was his only hope Kurtsev stared boldly at his opponent suddenly flinging the cloth directly into the bear's face. While the animal was fighting off the scraps of cloth filling its mouth, Kurtsev rushed up to its side and as the bear turned its head to look at him, he dispatched his second weapon—a handful of dirt, directly into the beast's eyes.

The bear roared its anger and charged where it had last seen his enemy. Kurtsev, expecting the attack, dove aside and the bear charged into the wooden sideboards of the arena, shaking the walls and scattering the spectators into the laps of those seated behind them. As the animal scrambled to get its balance, Kurtsev put into action the last part of a plan born of desperation.

Leaping astride the beast's back, the young man dug his bare heels into the bear's flanks and tightened his arm around the throat. He worked his fingers into the animal's thick fur to find its windpipe, recalling with fleeting gratitude the many times he had amused friends by twisting horseshoes and bending iron bars. With every muscle at his command and his face buried in the putrid smell of the animal's neck, he tightened his grip and felt the cordlike windpipe crush between his fingers.

The bear, unable to cough out the cloth in its mouth, called upon all its reserves of strength and swung its enormous head from side to side, determined to rid itself of the stranglehold on its throat. Cracking Kurtsev's head with its own was not enough and, in panic, it swung its long hind legs back and

forth, leaving Kurtsev's legs streaming with blood and his skull pounding. Still the young man hung on, even when the beast rose and toppled over in an effort to throw off the painful limpet on its back.

The bear fell backward and Kurtsev twisted his weight causing the animal to lose its balance and fall on its side. It attempted to get up but the young man, his legs buried deep in the soft side of the beast's belly, hung on to its windpipe. His hand was almost paralyzed with the effort and he knew he could not last much longer. Suddenly, the bear's legs jerked in a death spasm which plowed deeper and deeper furrows into the earth until the quivering flesh lay still.

Kurtsev staggered to his feet, blood running down his legs and his heart beating in his ears like a thousand drums. He walked drunkenly forward to the royal box, hardly hearing the cheers of the crowd as the count stood and extended his hand, palm up. Grave as before, Kurtsev turned from the smiling count in the direction of the dungeon and bowed slightly. "Alexandr Bolinski," he whispered, "your son lives."

Kurtsev found himself something of a celebrity as he was escorted back to his cell by the same guards who had taken him to the arena. Word of the huge bear's death had spread through the crowd. Unscrupulous scions of great families, foreign adventurers, felons, nomads, monks, and slaves whose lives could be terminated at the slightest whim of any Russian soldier—all admired the brave prisoner. The slaves, captives who lived dependent upon their willingness to perform any assigned tasks willingly and well, had iron-spiked collars riveted around their necks.

Talin slipped the noose over Kurtsev's head, happy at least to see the deep gouges in his prisoner's legs. He said nothing, but his eyes revealed some secret, sinister thought which appeared to amuse him greatly. When they reached the cell he took the rope from Kurtsev's neck, prodded him with his spear and pushed him inside, enjoying his prisoner's surprise at finding the heavy iron door to his cell wide open and his father gone.

"Where is my father and where is the freedom Count Dolgorsky promised us?" Kurtsev asked harshly, holding his

big hand against the cell door so the guards could not close it. Having seen him crush the life from the bear, they kept out of his reach. They were well-armed, but still they feared Kurtsev's muscular body and his deep penetrating eyes which had become dark and menacing. Kurtsev thought of escape. The four guards were seasoned veterans especially selected by the count, but while he knew they were awed by his might, they were more afraid of Dolgorsky than of him. "Where is my father?" he demanded again, his voice carrying into the outer courtyard.

"You'll see him shortly," Talin promised. "Now hurry, into your cell."

Kurtsev saw deceit in the man's eyes. Again he felt the compulsion to escape, but knew his chance of survival was virtually hopeless. Killing a few of these scum would almost be worth dying for, he thought, unless doing so would endanger his father's life. He took a deep breath and backed into the cell, telling himself to be patient as the iron bolt slid into place.

Later, remembering his father's warning that the count could not be trusted, Kurtsev looked out into the courtyard through his small cell window. He put his hands on each side of the opening, cursing it for being too narrow to crawl through—cursing its iron bars and feeling more and more pain in his legs. His eyes searched in all directions for sight of his father, sweeping over Talin who stood grinning evilly up at him from the yard.

"I said you would soon see your father," the guard said, pointing at two men who came into view dragging a limp figure between them.

Torches were being lit as the shadows deepened, but there was enough light for Kurtsev to recognize the elder Bolinski, unconscious, being hauled across the court. The old man was raised against a wall. His hands were lashed to ring bolts and his feet were spread apart and tied to metal rings near the floor. The side of his face lay against the wall which supported his drooping head and his back was exposed so that his son could see that his father's flesh had been stripped from his back.

A bucket of dirty water was thrown against Commander Bolinski's head and raw back and Kurtsev gripped the bars,

fighting for control. He saw consciousness gradually return to his father and began to wish his parent dead as he saw two slaves carry forward a metal box with hot coals. They placed it beneath the dying man's feet before they imbedded a pair of long pliers with two-foot handles in the hot coals.

Kurtsev stood rigidly at the window wiping sweat from his eyes, his body trembling in equal measure with rage against the count and anguish for his father. Talin, watching his red-headed prisoner closely, burst into raucous laughter. "You are just beginning to pay for killing my brother," he said.

Kurtsev's view was restricted, but he could see several guards dressed in the black clothes well-remembered from the time of Ivan the Terrible. They were soon joined by Count Dolgorsky, dressed in rich black velvet, his cap studded with precious gems and his polished, black leather boots as fashionable as the black silk handkerchief he carried, French fashion, in his sleeve.

The count stopped below Kurtsev's window and mopped his sweaty face while a small wooden stand was being placed at his feet. Stepping onto it, he looked into Kurtsev's eyes, then turned to face the crowd, one hand held up for silence and the other holding his perfumed handkerchief to his blue-veined nose to mask the odor of burnt flesh which was drifting from the roasting pits. His eyes swept over the corpses piled against the garrison walls and dissatisfied, he estimated their numbers. The work would have to be speeded up. The count began to speak in a hoarse voice, but the screams of the wheels interrupted him. He gave a quick order, knives flashed, and down a dark passageway, the Jews, gathered in large rooms to await the work of the hangman and butchers, heard the silence and wondered which of them would be next.

"Kurtsev Bolinski," the count began again, pointing up at the small cell window as he spoke to the crowd, "won his freedom this day and that of his father by killing the bear with his bare hands." He paused dramatically. "It has since come to my attention, however," he went on, "that Alexandr Bolinski and his son, Kurtsev, are traitors to Peter, czar of all Russia—they have made a secret alliance with the Jews to rob their homeland—they are traitors and must die."

The crowd stood in shocked silence until, prompted by the

count's men, shouts of "traitors must die!" and "traitors will die!" echoed through the mob. Switching one's allegiance from one leader to another was not unusual, but being a traitor to the mother country was unforgivable.

The count raised a hand and continued his charge. "No member of the Bolinski family, and no one involved with them from the Jewish community can escape punishment by death. The enemies of Czar Peter must die." He stepped down from the little platform and walked toward Alexandr who was still hanging from the wall. He waited while another bucket of water returned him to full consciousness, then raised his arm to pronounce judgment. "Alexandr Bolinski," he intoned, with mock gravity, "it grieves me that I must carry the news of your treason to our czar while he is, at this very moment, engaged in a struggle for our homeland. I belong at his side and would be there except for your perfidy. I am appalled that you, our leader's trusted commander, have been dealing with our enemy, Charles of Sweden. I have proof that you plotted to overthrow our beloved ruler to set yourself upon the throne. I have sent couriers with that proof to Czar Peter. Your forces will be sent to the front lines; your officers have been dealt with, and your army is now being led by my men who will demand complete loyalty. When my duty is completed here, my forces will proceed to Moscow and enter the battle there."

Kurtsev dazedly listened to the twisted words and knew what was to come. He was right. "After your trial," Dolgorsky continued calmly, as if the proceedings to come were a true reflection of justice, "we have reserved for you, Alexandr Bolinski, a punishment devised to match your crimes. These pliers will pull your ribs from your back, one at a time, while hot irons will seal off the flow of blood and slow your coming death."

Through a red miasma of anguish, Kurtsev saw several monks with writing tablets receive instructions, and just when he thought he could watch no more, the crowd parted and a naked girl was dragged into the light of the flaming torches. It was common for men, women, and children to go to the gallows and the fires without clothing, for an edict had gone out that prisoners would be stripped of their clothes and personal effects. These would be distributed to the poor who waited

eagerly for any relief from their own wretchedness. There were many people separating Kurtsev from his father and he caught only a brief glimpse of the girl as she was thrown onto her face before the count. She was young, barely blossoming into young womanhood, and the torchlight flickered sensuously across her soft curves. Suddenly Kurtsev could bear no more, as a guard brought forth a fine silk robe. He recognized it as his father's, and he suddenly knew the identity of the girl beyond a doubt. Unable to look away, he watched with undiluted horror as the count thrust the robe into the girl's face and, taking a handful of her hair, jerked her head back from her chest so that she would look up at the garment.

"Is this a gift given to Alexandr Bolinski by your father, Solomon ben Adhem?" the count demanded.

"Yes," Esther whispered, her head held rigid.

"See!" the count cried triumphantly, pointing to the wall. "Observe how your traitor has been taking bribes from the Jews and selling our Russian wheat to heretics, while Russians starve." He let go of Esther's hair and threw her to the ground with a contemptuous gesture. Next he called before him a Bashkir named Neshi who carried the sword of Solomon ben Adhem, its razor-sharp blade casting shafts of crimson light from the flames of the many torches. Again Dolgorsky jerked Esther upright. "Is this the sword used by your father, Solomon ben Adhem, to kill Russian soldiers?" he shrieked.

"We were being attacked," Esther whispered.

"It is that sword, your honor," Neshi said, grinning, as he used his elbows to rub his sides where vermin were causing him discomfort.

The count raised his hand for silence. "This girl, daughter of the murderer Solomon ben Adhem, goes as a slave to this brave soldier who killed the savage Jew, her father," he pronounced.

A group of soldiers formed a tight circle around the girl and Neshi, knowing full well the Bashkir would want an audience to witness his prowess. Esther, wholly dazed, was hardly able to control her thinking. She prayed to die or to faint, but her young body was strong and still fought for survival. For the past days, locked in the garrison while her friends and neighbors were tortured and killed, she had pleaded with her God to let

her die. Now, as the barbarian in front of her threw off his robe, she knew it was too late. His beady eyes measured her strength and stamina, much as a horseman evaluates a horse. He wished to show his comrades his expertise, for he was a veteran in such matters and seeing the strength in her young body, he would demand she use all of it. No man had ever touched her body, for her life had been sheltered by loving parents and brothers. Her thoughts had been filled with respect for Yahweh, her God, and she had memorized the Torah, learning that God created male and female to love each other in a marriage blessed and sanctified by Him. She had dreamed of a husband, thought shyly of having a baby at her breast, of homemaking, and loving, and sharing, but those dreams did not belong to this world of wheels and fires and feet stained by the blood of other prisoners.

Hardly daring to hope, Esther looked up into the count's eyes. "You have a chance to save yourself," he said, stepping close to her. He reached over and jerked an iron cross from a monk's neck and held it before her eyes. "Jesus was a Jew," he said. "Accept him as your savior, and no harm will come to you." He took his handkerchief and wiped his sweaty neck as he waited for her answer, his eyes admiring her young body.

Esther's thoughts flew to the teachings of her father and she felt as if a chill wind swept over her. The hope of survival tempted her to betray her beliefs, her God, her family, and her people, but she could not find the words. Her "no" was barely audible, but her thoughts screamed that the Christians had suffered death in the name of Christ, and now they killed in His name. She could not understand this evil work.

The count, still holding the cross before her eyes, pointed his finger at the window where Kurtsev gripped the bars. "If you will accept Christ," he said, "Kurtsev Bolinski can go with you to freedom. I will help you travel to any country safe for a Jew."

Esther wondered if there was such a place. "No," she said again, wanting to run to Kurtsev and lean on his strength and goodness. Her father had held him in high regard, she thought painfully, but she could not save him, or herself. He would understand.

The count stepped back into the circle of men, and the man

closest to Esther gave her a shove that threw her down upon the cold cobblestones of the courtyard. She huddled there, giving in to despair, while Neshi poked a flaming torch toward her bowed face. She felt the searing heat and, as she beat out her singing hair, her body went rigid and her mind came alert at last. Neshi had a whip as well as the burning torch in his hands and he looked down, wanting her to resist and fight so that he could conquer a female lioness, not a lamb. He laid a vicious lash across her back and her young body jerked with pain. He thrust the burning torch at her face again and her hands went out to fend it off as she jumped back and leaped to her feet. She ran away fearfully into a laughing circle of men who grabbed at her as she dashed about, trying to escape her tormentors. Tears of pain and anguish ran down her face, but she was helpless against Neshi who tossed a dagger and the torch on the paving stones at her feet, bringing enthusiastic comments from his audience. He kicked the torch aside, planning to use it later when her strength gave out for, he thought, a few burns always bring forth new energies.

In desperation Esther snatched up the dagger and raised it in her fist. Neshi made as if to grab her, and she struck at him as he jumped back, laughing with eyebrows raised in mock fear. Again he pretended to grab her, and as the knife slashed down, he timed it so that blood showed on his arm. He reached for the hand that held the knife, and she raked her nails across his face, fighting viciously while he stood back and laughed in satisfaction.

Kurtsev could see neither Esther nor her assailant, but he could glimpse his father whose body, pushed beyond human limitations, at last gave way to death. He knew by the crowd's excited reactions that Esther was fighting a losing battle and he was blinded with the sweat of his own impotence. His thoughts churned sickeningly as he gripped the iron bars of the window, twisting them in his frustration. The building was old and the mortar weakened by the years, but he was nonetheless startled when a bar came loose at the bottom. Unfortunately the window was far too small even for a small boy to crawl through, but his mind was awakened from its stupor of anguish and he began to think constructively. Suppose the metal-framed door was attached by the same crumbling mortar, he thought. Could

it be broken loose? He peered out the window and saw that Talin had stepped to the side to watch with enjoyment as Neshi tantalized the girl.

Across the courtyard was the firebox containing the heated pliers that had torn the life from his father. Against the wall, near the body, was the sword of Solomon ben Adhem. The count stood close by, his fat jowls trembling with excited laughter as his eyes devoured the scene of the little maiden and her adversary.

Desperately Kurtsev backed against the far wall of his cell! There were only about eight feet to run and he needed enough momentum to crash the door from its moorings . . . He performed a few knee bends to remove the stiffness caused by the deep gouges on his legs, and accidentally opened the wound. Little streams of blood ran down his legs, but he stretched to his full height, put his back to the wall and prepared to lunge forward and hit the door with his arm and shoulder. He paused, took a deep breath, and thought of his father's words, "My son, the strength of my loins is in you, and the faith of my fathers surrounds you." In his mind's eye he saw *Familia Invictus* and his muscles tightened as he drove his powerful legs toward the door of his prison.

Chapter Four

Kurtsev set aside all thought of failure. By the time he lunged forward, giving one leg a thrust against the wall for added impetus, his muscles were tingling and ready for action and his heartbeats pounded in his ears.

The door scarcely gave him pause as the top of its iron rim fell outward and crushed Talin's skull. He jumped free and charged through the outer circle of men, knocking them over on his way. The count, at first paralyzed at the sight of the giant Kurtsev rushing toward him, turned to run, to escape. He made his move too late and the young man caught him by the collar of his black silk shirt with one hand, grabbing a fistful of the ankle-length caftan in the other. Lifting the count bodily into the air, he hurled him into the scorching flames of the brazier.

Neshi, reaching for Esther, heard the disturbance. He took little notice until the men around him, caught off balance, fell to the ground and even then he was reluctant to allow anything to interrupt his pleasure. When curiosity finally overcame him he turned his head from the girl to see what was causing the

problem. This slight attention lapse was his undoing, for she lost no time in burying her knife deep in his hairy chest. His cry of outrage and anger was hardly noticeable above Count Mikhail Dolgorsky's screams as he tried to escape Kurtsev's vengeance.

Once satisfied that the brazier had put a permanent end to the count's treachery, Kurtsev turned away and grasped the sword of Solomon ben Adhem. The first soldiers and guards to come toward him met the full swing of the blade. He cut them down, making a path for Esther who was struggling forward toward him through the crowd. In the intense confusion, he grasped her hand, racing into the darkness of a nearby passageway. They paused only to slide open the bolts securing the doors of the prison and were soon lost in the frightened crowd of escaping prisoners scattering into the roads and byways that led to the river; desperate men, women and children who had nothing to lose by attacking their captors. By sheer force of numbers, the freed captives continued what Kurtsev had begun, overpowering the guards and disappearing beyond the flickering lights of the torches. The count's mounted men followed in hot pursuit.

"Not many of them will escape the count's rage," Kurtsev whispered to Esther seeing her look back as he paused to strip the coat off of a dead soldier. He tossed the garment to her and they again began to run toward the river. They could see the masts of ships under construction, silhouetted against the skyline and gained hope.

As they drew near the waterfront, Kurtsev decided it would be easier and safer to hide among the keels of the ships. There were huge piles of timber and many ships that offered safety. The pair carefully slipped from one shadow to the next until they reached the barges which, loaded with cargoes of wheat, lay tied to their moorings. In the morning, the dark murky waters of the River Don, moving turgidly south until they emptied into the Black Sea, would float them downstream to unload their cargoes. Later, while the barges' slave crews pulled them back upstream, sailing vessels would carry the wheat to the far corners of the earth.

Kurtsev and Esther had hardly reached the comparative

safety of the shadows when the freed prisoners began arriving. Kurtsev watched them clamber aboard the boats and made a rapid decision. Slashing the tie lines with his sword, he lifted Esther and tossed her aboard a barge, yelling, "Find your brother." By the time he had slashed the holding line of the next barge, Esther had regained her balance and turned frantically to the rail, screaming "Kurtsev—Kurtsev." Her voice reached him only faintly above the cries of the guards who ran from their lookouts, led by their sentry wolfhounds. The first guards met Kurtsev's sword and with young Bolinski's help, at least a dozen barges were floating on a bloodied river before the remaining prisoners were cut off from escape by more than one thousand of Count Dolgorsky's hard-riding soldiers.

Knowing there was no way he could survive against such opposition, Kurtsev jumped into the water and caught hold of the last line he had cut. Sword in one hand and rope in the other, he allowed himself to be pulled into the center of the river, floating nearly a mile downstream where the current was swift and dangerous. Finally, he was pulled up and onto the deck of a nearby barge by helping hands. Laying the sword on the deck, he lay there gasping for a moment, finally letting go of Solomon's sword and feeling the blood return to his sore hands. When he had recovered enough to sit up, he became aware of the silence on board and heard the faint screams of those left behind. The men guiding the pole rudders that steered the huge barge were grim; there was none of the cheering or shouting he had imagined would accompany a successful escape. Kurtsev intuitively took the silence as a tribute to those left behind to be slaughtered. There was no doubt the count's men would take no prisoners.

The movement of the barge on the water was unfamiliar to him. His mind was full of the horror of the last few days and the feel and stench of the prison was yet on his clothes and in his nostrils, despite having been in the river. Still, Kurtsev stretched exhaustedly upon the deck and willed himself, if not to sleep then to rest, allowing the sound of the water lapping against the barge's wooden sides, and the squeak of the long rudder-poles as the men twisted them in the big iron oarlocks,

to lull him into a half-sleep. The barge rode smoothly on the river's waters, and the smell of the marshes that lined the banks began to cleanse the prison odor. Low-flying birds flew overhead in swift formation and, except for the lookout darkly framed in the first pale light of morning and the men at the rudder, nothing moved. Huddled on the decks and in the holds suffering from exhaustion and sorrow, their lives uprooted by an evil which shrouded their memories and hopes, were the freed Jews. With the loss of their past and an uncertain future, they were prisoners still—their victory lost in the face of a system where freedom—real freedom—depended on the whim of the likes of Count Mikhail Dolgorsky.

Kurtsev shifted around, stiff from the hard wooden deck, but comforted by the warm summer night. For a while he discarded his pity for the people around him to examine his own immediate problems. It was possible that the count was alive. If so, he would be badly burned and furious. The elder Bolinski had known that the man was devious and hungered after the throne of Russia, but in the light of what had happened these last few days, Dolgorsky had shown himself to be as crazy as Ivan the Terrible. He would doubtless have his army pursue the escaped prisoners and there was likely to be a price on his own head—a huge price. Since the army would have no trouble finding the barges, there would be little hope of survival unless someone diverted the count's men away from the river and these people. It was a task for which he had little stomach, but as the one most qualified to take care of himself in such a deadly chase, he felt he had no choice. If the barge could be steered close to the shore, he could dive off and swim for land.

He thought of Esther, hoping she had heard his instructions to find her older brother who, Kurtsev hoped, was at Azov. It should not be hard for her to find him and as long as there was a price on his own head she would be far better off with her own people. He felt a sense of loss and regret at sending her away—even for her own safety and protection. This sense of loss was no doubt based on the link she provided with his past. The other part of his past was her father's sword, which he would not lightly relinquish.

He rose with the unconsciously fluid grace which lent him an

elegance not easily hidden—even under such unlikely circumstances—and spoke to the oarsmen. “Once I reach the shore I will wait until I see the count’s men. After I have made sure that they have recognized me, I will flee. They will assuredly follow me and that will give you time to complete your escape. Once you reach the sea, you will be safe.”

“And you?” one of the oarsmen asked.

“It will take them time to cross the river, and I am well familiar with the hideouts in those marshy lands,” Kurtsev said. “Don’t worry, I have no intention of letting them catch me.”

When Esther saw that Kurtsev was not following her onto the barge she allowed herself the luxury of tears for the first time since her escape. She watched him load group after group of terrified people onto the boats, but it was not until she saw the faces of the pursuing soldiers that she admitted to herself that Kurtsev had waited too long. She listened to the screams of those cut down by her father’s sword and, her eyes straining in the half-darkness, saw him leap into the river.

As the water closed over his head she reminded herself that he was an excellent swimmer and tried to keep track of his movements in the water, but she could find no trace of him in the faint light that filtered between the moving barges. Later she found she could not sleep despite her physical exhaustion. Kurtsev was like a brother to her and she thought longingly of her own brothers, whom he had taught to hunt and fish while they tutored him in rudimentary Hebrew conversation. Her brothers were fighting near Moscow with Peter, but she was sure she could find them in Azov as Kurtsev had instructed.

Esther’s mind was a jumble of thoughts as she turned from side to side, unable to relax. Worried about Kurtsev, she recalled the sight of him crashing through the door of his prison and knocking over the men who tormented her. She felt again the mixture of release and fear which overwhelmed her when she saw the red-headed giant grasp the count and hurl him into the fire; heard again the count’s screams of pain. The smell of burning flesh had not yet left her nostrils, and as she tossed restlessly she had a sudden vision of Alexandr Bolinski—friend

of her father, and father of her own dearest friend Katya—dying against a wall in Voronezh. She could not even contemplate Katya's fate, almost hoping she was dead because life as the count's captive was not worth living. She escaped such memories by deliberately activating the memory of Kurtsev wielding her father's sword and by reliving her feeling of relief when his hand grasped hers in their race to safety. Despite her effort to think only positive thoughts, her mind conjured up the sight of eyes lusting after her body and her arm, still covered by the heavy coat, involuntarily raised itself to cover her eyes and bring darkness to her weary soul. She fell asleep at last.

Esther slept until her unconscious efforts to ease into greater comfort, caused the hardness of the unfamiliar deck to waken her. She opened her eyes and saw the same birds that caught Kurtsev's eye. She watched them swoop low along the water, soar upward again and disappear in the dawn light. She smelled the marshes in the early morning mists, heard the water lapping against the wooden sides of the barge and sat up. A moment later she became aware that the coat she had worn for so many hours had fallen open and, suddenly aware of her nakedness, she blushed and grasped the garment close around her. She had run at Kurtsev's side practically naked and, knowing there had been no choice, she was nonetheless embarrassed. Holding the coat tightly around her, she rose and went to stand against the rail, her eyes searching for the other barges. The mist obscured her vision and she had begun to turn away when she felt rather than saw that one of the boats had veered close to the opposite shore. It was falling behind and, as the distance widened, her heart seemed to pause in its beat. A red head emerged through the mist—then a body, poised to dive. She watched Kurtsev jump cleanly over the side into the dark waters and disappear. Without further thought, Esther knew what she must do. Acting out of instinct, the young woman dropped the coat from her shoulders and dove into the water, her whole mindless reaction the result of an intuitive need to stay close to security and safety.

The helmsman jerked awake as he saw the white flash of Esther's body go over the side. He was not really surprised; it was just a case of too much grief and suffering.

But Esther was no suicide. She had sailed the Black Sea many times with her father and brothers and they had taught her to swim well, and safely in the rough water. She moved slowly in the river's strong currents, using the distant shore as her boundary. When she realized she would emerge several miles below Kurtsev who did not know that she was following him, her powerful strokes quickened, and her young body sliced expertly through the turbulent water. She knew she could not keep up that kind of pace, weakened as she was by the prison food and lack of sleep; more than that, emotional strain had taken its toll of her strength. She began to use up her last reserves of energy, drawing in great gulps of air as her eyes desperately clung to the shore. It was too far—she could not catch Kurtsev—even if she reached land, she would not know where to find him. She must—rest—float with the current. She prayed the prayers of her childhood “The Lord is my shepherd.” She asked God to help her. Like a little girl, she made impossible promises, offering perfection in return for the feel of dry land under her feet. She hardly thought it appropriate to include in her prayers the protection of her friend, Kurtsev Bolinski, but she craved that, almost as much as she did solid ground.

Courageous as she was, tears of self-pity mixed with the water. They were shed as much for the ben Adhem and Bolinski families as for herself. She remembered the time she first faced death—caught in a storm with her parents and brothers, sails ripped by a mighty wind, men straining with all their might to control the ship and keep it from capsizing. She was just past thirteen then, and had grasped her mother's arm as she stood at the helm, pitting all of her strength and skill against the storm as the men wrestled with the sails, lashed cargo, and manned the pumps. Her mother had given her a stern look and, shouting to be heard above the wailing winds, had yelled, “Esther, put your hands to the wheel and help! Jewish women don't weep! They act!”

Esther felt her strength respond to the memory of her mother's words. She willed one arm to slice the water, breathed deeply, and followed with the other—over and over—forcing her toes to churn the water. Closing her mind to

everything but the repetitive movements, refusing to listen to her thundering heart or to give in to her bursting lungs and screaming muscles, she kept moving. Her eyes sank into her sockets. The sky, rather than becoming lighter, darkened and she lost all concept of time and distance until, with a violent jerk, her body collided with a solid object. Fearing a sea monster, a log, a savage Kalmuk, she pushed away with flailing arms.

A familiar voice said, "Esther, be quiet girl, it's Kurtsev."

Kurtsev, standing shoulder-high in the turgid water, took the young woman's weight against him just as she lost consciousness. The river water moved slowly over her neck and shoulders, carrying her long black hair into its flow and revealing her small well-defined ears and graceful white neck and shoulders. The livid red welts made by the barbarian's whip showed vividly against her white breasts and Kurtsev felt a tremendous anger. And his anger did not soften, despite his joy at having saved Esther's life. He looked at her full red lips, ready to smile and saw, instead of beauty, a young woman who had witnessed the death of her father, who had been dragged by the Bashkir soldiers from her burning home, who had heard the screams of her people and witnessed torture and death. It amazed him that someone who had faced degradation before the count and the rabble, could have responded so readily when he reached for her hand. She was certainly brave, he thought, picturing her helping him free the prisoners, following his directions and even matching his stride in their run to the river. She was quite a girl, this surrogate sister of his. At least, with his own family gone, he had this little one to care for. Yes he was glad, in a way, that she had followed him.

When Esther finally opened her eyes, she smiled at Kurtsev and raised her arm to put it across his shoulder, wanting to help him carry her. She felt no sense of panic; she felt secure, warm, comfortable—a belonging neither to the past nor the future, but to the present. She and her dear friend were together—that, for the moment, was enough.

Kurtsev carried the girl into shallow water and set her on her feet, his thoughts in confusion. He was unable to understand her calm attitude. He removed his tunic, and she slid it on over

her head. As they walked over the marshy ground toward the willows and brush that lined the river, she parted her hair with her fingers, then braided it. They took a trail to higher ground, staying under cover of the densest growth. The sun was already over the distant mountains and Kurtsev, who had been prepared to reveal himself to the count's soldiers when a patrol came to the river, knew that following his original plan would jeopardize Esther's life.

"We'll have to wait for nightfall before we can leave here, girl," Kurtsev said, having sought out the most well-hidden resting place he could find. "This place is safe and you can rest. I will keep watch."

Esther reached out her hand. "Don't leave me, Kurtsev," she pleaded. "I can only sleep if I know you are near."

Suddenly, Kurtsev held up a hand in warning, a look of concern on his face, and Esther immediately became silent. At first she could hear no sound, but she soon attuned her ears to the soft hoofbeat of horses, the squeaking sound of saddle leather and the occasional jingle of bridle chains. Kurtsev, peering through the shrubs, saw a large number of soldiers and, downstream, a massive wolfhound running through the brush. The dog was sorting the scents, his nose close to the ground as he ran, and the young man felt a chill race up his back at the thought of what discovery would mean for them.

Esther reached out to cover his hand with hers, and he looked up and drew calmness from her eyes. They watched silently until the danger passed. Kurtsev knew he had to take Esther back to the marshes and move quietly back upstream to hide their scent from the animal before the soldiers returned. He drew her into the muddy reeds and brush, stooping low to stay below the sight of the riders, promising himself he would not leave until he retrieved her father's sword from its hiding place. It became warmer. The mosquitoes rose and covered them like a black shroud, their fiery stings driving the two young people into deeper waters. Kurtsev moved stealthily to where he could see the last of the soldiers, motioning Esther to follow as he picked his way through the willows and reeds of the marsh.

Kurtsev went shoulder high into the deeper waters, wading

upstream, well hidden by the rushes. They soon came within sight of the large blackened tree he had used as a landmark when he'd hidden the sword, and there they lowered themselves into the water.

Leaving only their heads visible, they peered through the rushes at a barge being towed back up the river. They had both seen this enormous task done many times. It took over sixty men to pull the boat, and there were several deaths each trip from such strenuous efforts. The slaves pulling the barge were given orders by men whose shouts accompanied the flash of long, cutting whips. These flashed in the sunlight, curling over the slaves' backs like the snakes Kurtsev had seen as a child in the markets of Constantinople. But neither these awful sights nor the river, polluted with waste from all the cities through which it flowed, served to stem their hunger or thirst. Both were weakening from lack of food and water, although Esther insisted she was neither hungry nor thirsty.

"I have found a stream of clear water that runs into the Don. It's not far from here. We will have water as soon as it is dark," Kurtsev whispered. "I promise you, too, a good meal before you sleep tonight. Can you really hold out until then, little sister?"

When he called her little sister, Esther gave him a puzzled look. She remembered her mother saying that men were difficult to understand, but he had surely seen that she was fully grown.

Kurtsev waited until the barge was out of their view. Signaling Esther to stay where she was, he began to search among the rushes for something they could use to float down the stream without attracting the attention of the soldiers. He eventually found several planks, ends of boards that had been discarded at some shipbuilder's shop. He located a few log ends, discarded because of knots and imperfections, all of which he intended to lash together as a rudimentary raft—if he could find something to use as a substitute for rope. A short distance upstream he found several bodies which had drifted into a stagnant pool and he reluctantly stripped off their garments and returned with them to Esther, first edging the stripped bodies into the current. After the pair selected enough

clothing to cover themselves, they tore the rest into strips and, by tying them together, were able to lash the logs and timber blocks together. Kurtsev's idea was not that they should ride on it, but that they hold to its sides and float. That way they could hide from soldiers searching the opposite bank. While they were working, a shout went up, and they saw soldiers ride out into the water to watch the naked bodies float by. They reacted exactly the way Kurtsev planned—having already seen bodies they would be less suspicious when a small empty raft washed by them.

When the soldiers at last moved downstream, beating and chopping at the tall grasses and swearing at the mosquitoes, the raft was ready.

"It's the best chance we have," he said, wading out into the current. The two young people each held on to their raft with one hand and, keeping their bodies out of sight, used their free hand to propel themselves and their raft further out into the stream.

Unexpectedly, a few soldiers turned back to scout the ground and their wolfhound picked up Kurtsev's scent. A great howl went up and the men began shouting commands, their horses churning the water into foam as they charged up the river, each wanting to claim the reward for killing Kurtsev Bolinski.

It was just the diversion Kurtsev and Esther needed. The soldiers rushed upstream near the shoreline, while the raft floated quietly downstream. Still Kurtsev knew it would be dangerous to remain on the river with so many eyes searching for him. Quickly, with Esther's help, he began to tow the raft into the marshes where the foam from the running horses still floated upon the water. They would be safe, at least temporarily, for the soldiers were unlikely to search the same place again. They stayed in the water, but became increasingly chilled. By late afternoon Kurtsev had no choice but to get Esther to dry land. Her eyes looked sunken and her cheeks were hollow. Though she smiled and assured him that she was fine, he could see that her strength had gone and she was becoming ill. Just as he was moving her toward solid ground, she covered her mouth and gave a smothered scream, her eyes wild with terror and revulsion as she pulled a shiny, black

bloodsucker about the size of Kurtsev's thumb from her thigh. She threw the fat leech out into the stream and Kurtsev took her into his arms to calm her.

It had been several hours since the soldiers' departure and the river seemed clear of all human life, but there were several hours of daylight left. It would have been safer to move to the shore after dark. To go now would be risky, but Esther's condition demanded that he take her into cover as quickly as possible.

Finding a small foliage-enclosed area, shaded from the sun except where shafts of light beat down between the trees, he laid Esther down and helped her remove her dripping, filthy clothes. He wrung the water from his newly-acquired shirt and turned to massage her body, rubbing some warmth back into her before squeezing out her clothes and laying them out to dry. Stamping the water from his boots, he again put on his wet shirt and carefully made his way up the rise to look between the trees at the vast plains of wheat, full heads of grain swaying in the afternoon breeze. He felt a tightening of his throat and tears welled into his eyes as he thought of how, just a few days before, he had looked through the window of his own home, his father by his side, planning the harvest of their vast wheat fields. His mother and sisters were alive, beautiful and optimistic.

He could see travelers riding up the main road from Tsaritsyn and he kept well out of sight to watch their approach. As they came closer, he saw that it was a caravan of Jews, traders who had created routes of commerce from Prague to Kiev via Poland and Hungary and around the Caspian Sea by ship, to Persia and India. They were the *holchei derachim al Russia*, the Russian wayfarers. Dust rose from their two-wheeled carts, wagons, and from the hoofs of their horses and donkeys as the caravan, which stretched out over a quarter of a mile, moved forward. Esther needed attention. These were her own people. There were several heavily-armed mercenaries in the lead but, unafraid for his own safety, he stepped out onto the road. The men he faced were black-bearded; their skin the color of seasoned leather and their eyes, hardened to enemies, examined him cautiously. Kurtsev could see more armed men

on each side of the column, and several more at the rear where young boys herded spare stock, but he stepped forward fearlessly and held up his hand.

"Don't be afraid," he said, "I come in peace. I need your help."

Chapter Five

The wagon train of the *holchei derachim al Russia*, the wandering Jews, consisted of large two-wheeled carts and four-wheeled wagons, thirty or forty pack animals and, in the rear, a herd of cows and horses. The caravan, which stretched out over a quarter of a mile, was led by two Greek guards riding spirited grain-fed stallions. The huge men did not scare Kurtsev, for as they came closer he saw they were relaxed despite their challenging appearance. The muskets they normally carried across their saddles were pointed directly at his chest, but somehow he felt they would do no harm unless attacked. Only their horses were nervous, anxious to catch up with the moving wagon train.

"I am Kurtsev Bolinski," the young Russian announced, "and I would like to speak to your leader."

The larger and older of the two men had heard of Alexandr Bolinski, friend of the Jews, and of his red-headed son. Kurtsev, however, was wearing dead men's clothes that were too small for his big frame and his red hair was matted and dark with the dirt of the marshes. "You speak with me," the older man said finally.

"There has been an attack on the Jews at Voronezh," Kurtsev said simply. "The daughter of Solomon ben Adhem has escaped and is in hiding. I would like to leave her in your care—the care of your leader. Her father and most people of her village have been tortured and killed. Count Mikhail Dolgorsky's soldiers are searching for surviving Jews and there is a price on my head for helping some of his captives escape."

Both guards gave their full attention to Kurtsev. Finally, one fingered a broken nose and then, commanding his companion to stay behind, rode back toward a large cart, distinguishable from the others by virtue of its purple hood. The guard stayed alongside the rolling vehicle, conversing with its occupant in fluent Greek until they came abreast of Kurtsev. At this point the driver drew the cart out of the moving line of the caravan.

"I am Menasseh ben Yakov," the driver said, pulling up to Kurtsev. His voice seemed to come from a deep well. "Where is this daughter of Solomon ben Adhem?"

"I have hidden her from those seeking her life. I must be sure you will welcome and protect her before I reveal her whereabouts. Esther's father is dead; most of her people have been tortured and killed, as have my own father, mother and sisters, because of our friendship with ben Adhem. Now Count Dolgorsky seeks my life."

"Why?"

"Because I escaped his torture and took Esther and some of her people to safety," Kurtsev said, as simply as he had done before.

"We saw the barges as we were coming up the river trail, and though there seemed to be an exceptional number of people on them, we were not aware that they were Jews or that their lives were in danger . . ."

"They will be safe from the Russians when they reach the sea," Kurtsev interrupted.

"Yes, and little Esther will be welcome and safe with us." He motioned to the two Greeks who dismounted and followed Kurtsev. He wasted no time with thanks, letting the guards follow him until they came almost within sight of the girl. He then asked them to wait while he made certain she was clothed and would not be startled by the armed strangers he had brought back with him. He was surprised to find her awake and

wearing clothes that were clean, albeit wrinkled. She had washed in the little stream and her hair was hanging down over one shoulder in a thick braid. He told her about the wagon train as they walked back to the waiting guards and about Menasseh ben Yakov. The moment the girl saw the trader, she gave a delighted cry and hurled herself into his open arms.

"Esther, little Esther. I am so sorry to hear about your father," ben Yakov said, cradling her gently against his big chest as they walked toward the wagons and a group of children who found it hard to contain their curiosity and questions. "Hush, hush, children," he admonished, his tone nonetheless gentle. "You will hear Esther's story soon enough. First we must find some food for our guest and let her sleep. And we must also take care of our Russian friend," he said smiling.

Esther was helped into the cart by Anastasia, Menasseh's wife. Her motherly comfort, welcome as it was, broke the girl's ferocious courage and she cried against Anastasia's breast for her own family. Later she was able to eat and drink and, at last, to relax as the creaking sound of wooden wheels on the dusty road rocked her to sleep in the heat of the afternoon.

While Esther slept Kurtsev sat with Menasseh. The young Russian alternately bit into huge chunks of bread and ripe wedges of cheese as he listened to the older man.

"Greeks are my family's personal guards," ben Yakov told Kurtsev. "When I purchased them they were slaves. Since that time they have earned their freedom and are paid for their work. They will rejoin their families as free men when we reach their home villages."

Kurtsev smiled widely and nodded, his mouth full of his host's good cheese.

"The big one with the broken nose is called Sampson; his companion is Paul," Menasseh continued. "I would trust those two with our lives. The other guards—twenty in all—were also purchased as slaves. They, too, are earning their freedom by working for me. You will also notice Africans, Chinese, and a mixture of various white races from different lands."

The young Russian, greatly impressed, rode along in silence. He finished his bread and cheese, tipped the waterskin to his mouth for a long cool draught and hung the skin back on the peg.

"What are your plans, Kurtsev Bolinski, and what can I do to help?" Menasseh asked.

"I must join my father's command in Moscow as soon as possible. Czar Peter is presently defending Moscow against Charles of Sweden. I must also clear our family's name."

"Travel with us to Azov. From there you can get to Moscow—we will give you a horse for your journey," Menasseh said, resuming his place in the caravan's line. "For now, take the next wagon, stretch out and sleep."

"First I must retrieve the sword I hid earlier today," Kurtsev responded, nodding his head in agreement.

The young Russian did not return to Menasseh's side until, true to his word, he appeared holding Solomon ben Adhem's sword. "This belongs to Esther," he said. "One day she will pass it on to her son. Will you accept and care for it for her?"

Menasseh's eyes were sad as he fingered the lettered inscription on the sword. "Next year in Jerusalem . . ." he murmured. "Not this time, my friend, your enemies were too numerous." He sighed. "Solomon's faith lives on in his daughter, and she is worthy of his faith. I gave this sword to Solomon," he said, turning to Kurtsev. "I had it made for him." Laying the weapon down behind him he said gently, "Yes, I will keep it safe for Esther's son."

Kurtsev went to the wagon that ben Yakov had chosen for him, climbed into it, stretched wearily out on the clean straw and was instantly asleep. For the first time he felt some relief from the strain of the last few days. He now allowed himself to rely on the protection of Sampson, Paul and Menasseh. He was not alone. For the time being at least, he felt safe and secure. His peace was to be short-lived however. Sleep was just overcoming him when Sampson drew close beside the wagon.

"Russian," the guard whispered, "soldiers are coming. Draw the straw over you and stay out of sight."

It was not long before Kurtsev heard hoofbeats and the rattling of swords interspersed by the snorts of horses. The canvas at the rear of the wagon had a drawstring that closed tightly to keep out light, but he could see through the opening at the front of the wagon.

"Jew, I would search your wagons."

The hoarse shout penetrated Kurtsev's hiding place. He

looked around. Bedding was neatly rolled against the sides of the wagon and he realized he was lying where Menasseh's children usually slept. From the sounds outside, the military unit was but a small patrol of about twelve men. Despite the danger he peered outside. By shutting one eye and squinting with the other he could see that the soldiers had been surrounded by Menasseh's guards who were making no attempt to hide their muskets, swords and knives.

"Captain, I am Menasseh ben Yakov," the Jew said in fluent Russian. "What can we do for you?" As if expecting to hear nothing more serious than a request for water, he made no move to stop the caravan's progress.

"Stop your wagons and prepare to be searched," the captain ordered, fully aware that he was outnumbered by Menasseh's guards, sure these twenty were only a sample of others hidden in the covered wagons. He had every intention of proceeding cautiously, of not underestimating ben Yakov or the bravery of his men.

"Captain," Menasseh smiled, "I travel the roads of Russia under your czar's protection. I have here Czar Peter's written authorization; would you care to read it over some bottles of excellent Russian whiskey? Would this satisfy the captain and his soldiers?"

The faces of the mounted men showed ready agreement; it had been a hot and fruitless ride.

"Sampson, please see that each of these men gets a bottle of our best," Menasseh ordered when the captain did not object. Waving his hand in a friendly gesture, the trader smiled again, murmured a quiet, "Thank you, gentlemen," and gave his attention to the road ahead.

Sampson called out the orders. Soon the mounted soldiers had disappeared down the tree-lined road toward the river, bottles in hand. Taking their captain's silence as permission, they looked forward to some singing, shouting, and even fighting. With a little luck they'll kill each other, Menasseh thought. He smiled at the sour expression on the captain's face, knowing the soldier was thinking the same thing as he watched his men ride away from the caravan.

It was almost dark before the traders stopped to prepare for the night. Leaving only enough room for the animals to be

rapidly driven through if the need arose, they formed a circle large enough to accommodate all of the wagons. The stream beside which they were camped would satisfy the needs of the travelers and their stock. Firewood, gathered by the children along the way, was transformed rapidly into cooking fires by willing hands, including Kurtsev's, and an air of celebration prevailed.

One wagon was equipped to repair or make any broken parts wherever it was necessary, and to provide shoes for the horses. It had supplies of iron and steel, rolls of cowhide for shoes or harness repairs. A portable forge was set up and soon the sound of a hammer on an anvil rang across the encampment. It was there that Menasseh, with his family gathered around him, spoke to Kurtsev. "Come join with us, my Russian friend," he said, his voice sincere. His eyes included Kurtsev in his family circle. "Our meal will soon be ready and we wish you to eat with us. Esther will be with us soon."

"I am ready to join you now, ben Yakov," Esther said, climbing down from the wagon. Kurtsev held out his hand.

"How quickly you young people recover your strength," Menasseh said, his eyes twinkling when he saw how pleased the two young people were to see each other. Kurtsev felt a faint embarrassment as eight pairs of eyes watched him curiously. "Let me introduce my family," Menasseh said, amused. "The beautiful young lady bending over the cooking fires is my Tamara. Our home is in Holland . . . Amsterdam. . . . There she is called Mara; here in Russia she is called Tamara."

The young woman acknowledged her father's introduction by waving the large wooden spoon in her hand.

"My eldest son is Bernardo," Menasseh continued. "He is sixteen years old. Where is he?" The father looked around the group of children and demanded with mock anger, "Where is my eldest son?"

The children laughed. "He is helping with the horses, papa," one of them answered. "You know that."

"You will notice that my little ones are very impudent, tovarich . . . but . . . I cannot always make myself discipline them," Menasseh said. The children looked at him and giggled. It was apparent to Kurtsev and Esther that the ben Yakov family regarded each other with deep affection and respect.

"Fernando is my next son—ah, there you are." Daylight was fading rapidly and the cooking fires cast flickering shadows across the group as a serious-looking boy came forward at the sound of his name being spoken. "Come here, my son," Menasseh said gently. "Tell our friend how you were given your name."

Kurtsev realized he must have reacted to the incongruity of a name like Fernando ben Yakov. Fernando looked around the group before he addressed himself shyly to the Russian. "My parents were in Spain, at a city on the River Ebro, when I was born. The city was called Tortosa; it lay south of the great city of Barcelona. My parents were on the road to Madrid, but mama loved Tortosa and decided it should be my birthplace and papa agreed."

Kurtsev felt Esther's hand steal into his palm and he squeezed it gently. Even in the half dark he could see that she loved the feeling of belonging to a family again, especially a family like the ben Yakovs.

"Delores is twelve and a great help to her mother. Come, my pretty, tell our guest about yourself," Menasseh continued.

Delores tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulders and, as she passed close to the firelight, Kurtsev could see her saucy blue eyes. She was a beautiful child with the promise of exceptional beauty to come. Her lips were full, and her even teeth contrasted beautifully with her pink lips and olive-toned skin. She wore a long full skirt, gathered close to her waist with a bright blue sash, and Kurtsev suspected it was no accident that the color of the sash closely matched her eyes.

"I was born in Madrid, the most beautiful city in the world," Delores said, standing proudly before Kurtsev. "Papa was a friend of the archduke, Charles of Austria who became the king of Spain. I was born on the birthday of Charles's favorite niece, Delores, so papa and mama thought I, too, should have that name." She took a breath and was ready to go on when her father held up his hand.

"Thank you, my sweet. Another time we shall hear more," he said, stopping her gently. "It is Theresa's turn. She is our musician," he said, turning to Kurtsev and Esther. "Little Tessa's musical ability is surely a gift from God," he told them. "She picked up a violin when she was three years old, and in a

few minutes she was playing tunes. Since then her music has opened doors for us, making our merchandising possible in many countries where we might otherwise have had difficulties."

The eight year old seemed too thin, her eyes too large for her narrow face. When she spoke, it was in a hesitant treble. "My papa gave Marie Theresa, the wife of Louis XIV of France, the cloth for her wedding gown. The king and the queen praised his gift which was silk that came all the way from China."

"Such silk was unknown before that time," interrupted Menasseh.

Tessa turned to look at her father. "Papa said I was too little to have two first names, so I was given just the one, Tessa. I think it is very beautiful."

"It is beautiful, and so are you, little princess Tessa," Kurtsev said gravely.

"Get your violin, daughter," Menasseh said, "for before the evening is over, we shall ask you to play for us." He looked around at his family as though confused. "Let's see, now, who is the next?" A small boy shot his hand into the air, and his brothers and sisters pointed at him. "Ah, William—of course. How could I forget?" Menasseh laughed indulgently. "Come, my son. William is our student," the older man went on while the boy rose awkwardly to his feet. "He can recite the Torah in Hebrew, German, and Spanish, and now he is learning Greek from Sampson and Paul. He often rides with them on their great stallions, and they converse in their mother tongue."

The small boy climbed upon his father's knee. He had a clubfoot, and managed without a crutch only with great difficulty, but he wore a wide infectious smile as he looked at the loving group around him. "I am William," he announced and stopped, waiting to be coaxed. Kurtsev, aware that this was a game the family played without thought of William's handicap, was touched. "Papa and mama went to England on very important business. They had no choice but to take me along, because you see, I was not yet born. The day we arrived, I arrived too, aboard the ship. Papa celebrated by giving me the famous English name of William."

As the child made his way to his seat, dragging his deformed foot, Menasseh said, "Sergei is next. Where is he?" Again the

children laughed. Everyone knew the only time Sergei stayed around camp was at mealtime and even then he often put food in his pockets to eat on the trail, too curious to wait for the caravan. Menasseh turned to Kurtsev and Esther with apologies. "You will have to wait to meet our Sergei—Marie?"

A child stirred in her sleep—little Marie, sound asleep. "She shall sing a song for you another time," Menasseh smiled. "There," he pointed to the babe lying in its mother's arms, "is our little Yuri, the baby. He is only awake when food is given to him. But one day he will match you for size, Kurtsev." Menasseh looked questioningly at his wife Anna, and asked, "Now I hope our supper is ready?"

After the food had been blessed it was passed around in metal bowls. Bernardo and Sergei showed up in time for the meal. Sergei gave wild flowers from the riverbank to his mother and Esther but his father looked angry. Kurtsev saw the glances that passed between the father and his two sons and knew they were in trouble for missing the blessing. There will be several father, son discussions before the evening is over, Kurtsev thought, smiling.

After they had broken bread Menasseh continued talking to Kurtsev. "You have learned that my children have Christian-sounding names and must be wondering why. They also have Jewish names that are used in the ghettos and the synagogues, but there are so many restrictions placed on us, that we have learned to survive by adapting, like lizards, to the ways of the country we are in. Still we keep hoping that someday we will live in the land of Israel—perhaps in Jerusalem itself." His voice tapered off momentarily before he continued. "You have witnessed the massacre of the Jews at Voronezh, Kurtsev. That was no isolated incident; it has happened in too many other places, and will no doubt continue until God delivers us from our trials and returns us to the land of our heritage—in His own time of course."

Kurtsev, struck by Menasseh's resigned tone, said nothing. Still he found it incongruous that the same man whose bravado assured the survival of such a large caravan would accept the massacre of his people as inevitable. Even as they sat, they could be robbed and molested with but small chance of official reprisal. Attacks were not uncommon.

After they had eaten, people began to gather at Menasseh's campfire. Kurtsev was surprised at the large number, two hundred at least, who crowded inside the circle of wagons. He saw how Menasseh's beard shone in the firelight as he spoke and he relaxed at last.

"Bernardo and Sergei my sons," Menasseh said later. "Before we ask Tessa to play, let me introduce you to our two guests." With his hand on the shoulders of each boy, he continued, "These boys are both excellent horsemen; they ride hard and fast, but they use wisdom, too. They never ask more speed and distance than the animals can easily give." The boys smiled at their father, knowing that what he said was as much hope and advice as fact.

When Tessa appeared with her violin, even little Marie sat up, her eyes bright with anticipation. She slid from her father's knee where she had been napping and went to sit beside Esther.

"Theresa has had training with some of the best musicians in Europe, but most of what she plays comes from her heart," Menasseh said quietly, with obvious pride.

The child turned to Esther and Kurtsev, her eyes filled with dreams; her glance went to their clasped hands and, looking from one to the other, she placed her bow lightly upon the strings of her instrument and began to play. For an hour, two hundred people of all ages sat motionless, enthralled with the sounds coming from Tessa's heart—sounds of moonlight and shadows, of love and laughter, of tenderness, excitement, and happiness. Kurtsev looked down at Esther and felt the urge to take her in his arms and hold her close forever.

It took two more days on the road to bring the caravan to the town of Azov—two days of talking and planning. Sometimes Esther rode horseback with Anastasia; sometimes, if possible, she walked beside Kurtsev, taking two steps to his long stride. On one occasion she rode beside Menasseh on the seat of the wagon as he drove the team, talking to him about Kurtsev as if he were her own father.

"I fear for Kurtsev if he goes to Moscow, ben Menasseh. Count Dolgorsky's lies have surely reached Czar Peter. In times of war the czar cannot sift through reports to find truth

and the count is more likely to be heard than Kurtsev. He is a blood relative of Peter's while Kurtsev no longer even has his father's command."

"Do you love this Russian, Esther?" Menasseh asked quietly.

Esther nodded.

"Love is a wonderful thing, but it is often painful," Menasseh said, his voice filled with understanding. "Certainly your young hero is a man to be admired—and feared by his enemies; he has twice saved you from death and worse. Certainly he has earned your gratitude."

"But he is not a Jew," Esther interrupted, anticipating the doubts born of tradition that did not allow intermarriage between Jew and Gentile.

"Would he become a Jew?" Menasseh asked seriously.

"We have not talked about it," Esther answered, just as Sampson rode abreast of their wagon.

"Sir," he said, "there is a suitable camping site just ahead. Shall I give the order to pull over?"

Menasseh studied the road ahead. "Yes, Sampson, I agree with your choice. We shall camp here tonight."

The decision to halt put an end to Esther's conversation with Menasseh, at least until the camp chores were completed. Teams had to be unhitched, cows milked, loose stock herded to pasture, cooking fires started and the meals cooked. When all was underway, Menasseh called together Kurtsev and Esther, the guards, Sampson and Paul, and his eldest son Bernardo. Seated on rugs spread out on the ground, they used up the last hour of daylight, discussing the future. "You plan to leave us soon, Kurtsev," ben Yakov began, "but we ask that you remain here. We are going to Holland where Jews are welcome. You could find employment in the East India Trading Company which my friends and I control. You have much that would contribute to the growth and welfare of the company."

Kurtsev studied the two Greeks, Menasseh and his sons. He deliberately avoided looking at Esther, knowing the pain he felt would be reflected on her face. "I am grateful for your generous hospitality, Menasseh," he began slowly. "I owe my life to the help you gave us when we needed it most. It is an honor to call you my friend—friends, for I feel bound to all of

you. But you must understand that I have a duty to my country and to my father's name; somehow I must find a way to lead my father's command in the czar's battle with Sweden."

Kurtsev's sincerity was deep enough to silence any protests. Even Esther said nothing. Finally the Greek, Sampson, spoke. "Russian, should you need help, you have only to ask."

"I am grateful. I, too, would welcome a chance to stand beside you against your enemies."

Menasseh, who had hoped to persuade Kurtsev against undertaking what he knew to be a dangerous mission, found himself unable to ask the son to forget his father's dying wish. Instead he said, "So be it!"

Esther gave him a look of mingled anger and disbelief as he continued, this time addressing Sampson. "Tomorrow evening is the Sabbath. My family and I will go to the ghetto in Azov to attend synagogue. We will leave early in the morning and stay until the Sabbath is over. Today is Thursday; we will not be back until some time on Sunday. That is too long to be away, so I must leave someone in command. Sampson, you will take charge of the caravan until my return." He turned and spoke directly to Kurtsev. "Since we were here last, a year or so ago, a new nobleman has taken command, a descendant of Ivan. There will not be time to call on him before the Sabbath, but when I return I will present him with gifts."

"How can I reach you if there should be trouble?" Sampson asked.

"Send a messenger to the ghetto. As for me, I will send Bernardo if necessary, even if he must travel on the Sabbath. Remember, Sampson, that what gold and silver we have is hidden in compartments under the scrap iron and steel that we use for repairs. Watch it like a hawk and, in case of trouble, save it."

Sampson nodded his head with understanding, but Kurtsev looked puzzled. He thought Menasseh should be stressing safety—the lives of his people.

"We cannot own lands, but we must be prepared at all times for the inconvenience of the courts; fines, taxes for land crossings, confiscation, in fact—bribing our way out of torture and death. I am a trader, yet I must pay for merchandise in cash."

"But your trade has been encouraged by the rulers of most countries," Kurtsev responded.

Menasseh sighed. "Rulers die, are replaced; sometimes their successors are hostile to our people," he said matter-of-factly. "We do what we must to survive."

"It seems that every time I think I understand your people . . ." Kurtsev said slowly, almost as if he were thinking out loud.

Menasseh's laugh interrupted him. "Young man," he said, "I was born a Jew, of a line of Jewish tradition as long as that strong right arm of yours, and even I do not fully understand my people. On the other hand, you and I both understand the need to survive." Kurtsev was silent, as Menasseh continued. "Come with us as far as Istanbul, Kurtsev. There is much you can do there to prepare for your return to Voronezh and your journey to Moscow. At least stay until Sunday when my family and I return from Azov.

You will come with us, won't you, Esther?" the elder gently asked the girl who was looking increasingly unhappy. "Anastasia could use your help with the children."

"Of course I will come," Esther answered quietly, standing up. Mumbling something about a walk, she turned away to hide the tears she could no longer hold back at the thought of Kurtsev's departure.

"We will eat soon, and later Tessa will play for us," Menasseh called after her. "Don't wander too far away from the camp." He saw Kurtsev make a move to get up and said, "Go, young man. Follow her—she needs you." He smiled at the rapidity with which Kurtsev took his departure. It was not that long ago that he acted as these two young people did now. He looked around for his wife and joined her at the cooking fire.

Surely Kurtsev would decide to stay with them for a while. Menasseh wondered if the young man's ardor would extend to even the kind of abbreviated studies necessary before he could marry Esther—if indeed he had marriage in mind.

Chapter Six

Esther pointed out the evening star. "I look at it every night and wish for the safety of my brothers. Soon I will have to add you to that wish," she said. "If my brothers are still alive, one is with Czar Peter and the other is on our ship in the Caspian Sea, perhaps looking up at this selfsame star?" She was lying on the soft summer grass, her hands cushioning her head. Kurtsev, sitting beside her, heard the yearning in her voice, a sort of homesickness that attacked him often in the night before he fell asleep. "As a girl I sailed around the seas with my father and mother and brothers," Esther said softly. "Those were wonderful times."

Kurtsev smiled at her. She was but a mere girl, but her experiences had etched themselves upon her face and it was no longer difficult to think of her as a woman. "I should be with your brother, helping the czar win the war against the Swedes, but first I must get my family name cleared of the count's accusations," Kurtsev said.

"You think only of war," Esther said impudently, feeling she had little to lose. She rolled over and sat up, her thoughts

disturbed. Rising, she walked out to where the young children were playing and Menasseh, who had been watching from a distance, left Anastasia to join Kurtsev.

"I am told that Czar Peter's battle is letting up," he told the young Russian. "King Charles has been stopped, at least for now, and has sent for supplies to last him through the winter. Most of his provisions come from Holland. If those supplies were cut off, Charles would be defeated. They are predicting a severe winter—one of the worst." Menasseh stopped, contentedly puffing on his pipe. He had said enough. Kurtsev could take it from there. There were ways to serve other than with the sword.

Having planted the seed, Menasseh left. Kurtsev hardly noticed his departure; his thoughts were racing around. A thousand new avenues for revenge had been opened up by the elder's words. He looked at Esther who was leaning against a tree watching the children at play and did not delude himself that she was not one of the major reasons for his elation. Kurtsev rose to go to her but Anastasia came and sat beside the girl.

"I won't be staying long," he heard the woman say briskly. "Kurtsev will be coming, and you'll want him to yourself, I'm thinking."

"I don't think Kurtsev cares one bit, so stay if you care to. All he wants is to go to battle," Esther said. "I know we are taught that women are but a part of men's lives, while men are the center of our existence. I know I was taught that was how God meant it to be; the Torah teaches a woman to be submissive to her husband's larger purpose. Still it seems to me that my father listened to my mother."

"Hear me, child," Anna said gently. "Men cannot envision life's total purpose as women do. We must help them with our patience and love—love with apparent submissiveness." She rose to her feet and squeezed the girl's shoulder, leaving Esther to sit and wish she had more of Anna's understanding.

Kurtsev stood silently for a moment, then dropped back onto the grass beside Esther. She leaned back and looked up at him consideringly. Suddenly she decided on docility. "I've never heard you talk about the war in Moscow," she said. "It

must be exciting to fight for your country. I'm sure Peter will be pleased when you are back at his side."

"Yes. That's what I should do. But first I must find a way to clear my father's name. If I went riding into camp now, I'd be placed under military arrest and I might never get to see Czar Peter."

"Your family's tradition of loyalty must mean something," Esther countered. "Surely by now the count will have been discredited. Perhaps you will find the czar waiting with open arms."

"Most likely he would send me straight to the guardhouse," Kurtsev chuckled. He reached out and caressed her cheek with one finger. "I thought you were very intense about me going along to Holland with the caravan," he said softly. "What's happened to change your mind, little one?"

"After your father's name is cleared and you have been back your lands, after you have made Russia safe for Czar Peter and his friends, I hope that you will come to Holland for a visit," Esther said quietly. "My people and I will always be in your debt for the help you have given me. Now that I am safe, I know you must do what is important to you. I will be fine with Menasseh and Anna and the rest."

"Are you saying you don't need me any longer?" Kurtsev asked, disconcerted. He had been vacillating between a feeling of obligation and the necessity to get to Moscow to do battle against Charles. Now that he was free to do the latter, he was no longer so sure that was what he wanted. He wondered briefly if Esther could have found another interest, but he knew the Greeks all had families and could think of no one else in the caravan—unless there was someone in her past, someone she hoped to meet again. He felt an uncertainty in her attitude that was strange to him.

"My safety is assured now, Kurtsev," Esther said, breaking into his thoughts. "I have been a burden to you. Your concern for me has kept you from doing what you would like for too long already. If you do not come to Holland, perhaps I will see you in Moscow one day." She laughed, rose, and began to walk away.

"Wait, Esther. I had better see to it that you get safely to

Istanbul," Kurtsev said, reaching for her hand to keep her from leaving. He drew her back onto the grass beside him. "Do you really want me to leave the caravan?" he asked gently.

"It takes time to grow. I've finally recognized that you have your life to live—and it is very different than the life I've been reared to expect," the young woman responded. "You are a warrior, needed by the great men of the world to fight their battles for them. You must live your life as you see fit while I must do as my father would wish. One day my brothers will find the right man to be the father of my children. He will be a Jew, trained in the traditions of our people."

Kurtsev flinched because everything she said was true, and yet everything in him rejected the thought.

"You will be far away. It would be foolish for me to dream of you." You are my friend and my hero, Esther thought, and I would do anything if things were different. "When you come to Holland one day," she said, with as much bravado as she could muster, "my children and I will be glad of your coming."

This time she rose firmly and walked away, leaving Kurtsev feeling more alone than ever before. He sat for a long time, considering her words. It was true. Their lives were far apart. He felt a deep commitment to Czar Peter. For the first time, however, he began to examine the fact that his father's service and loyalty had in no way protected the Bolinski family. Alexandr Bolinski's loyalty had not stopped his brutal death, nor had it precluded his lands from being confiscated by an ambitious traitor. As for the price on his own head, there was a good chance he would be condemned as a traitor to the crown.

Kurtsev considered the implications of not letting Esther go—of taking her for himself, as his wife. The beautiful young woman was all that any man could desire. Her face and form were only secondary to the beauty of her courage, yet it was that very courage—her heritage as a Jew—which was the major deterrent to him as a Russian. Their children would have to be raised in her cultural traditions, and although he knew the ideology to be sound, he did not know if he could readily give up his own heritage. Still it excited him to contemplate a family, to imagine Esther as the mother of his children. He considered his obligation to his czar, and imagined himself losing the battle to restore his good name and going to his

death as a traitor. He found himself trying to isolate the basic essentials necessary to his existence.

With a fluid motion, Kurtsev rose to his feet and strode rapidly to the horse that had been provided for him. What he needed was some good, vigorous exercise to clear his brain. He dug his heels into the flanks of the big bay gelding and raced across the fields.

Esther watched him go with a sense of hopelessness. His commitment to homeland and czar was as much a part of him as his mixture of Russian and Scottish blood. It would be difficult to forget the red-haired giant who had come to mean so much to her, but it would not be impossible. She would have loved to cradle a little red-haired baby in her arms, but that would not stop her from carrying on her Jewish tradition of a husband and family. It was not until Kurtsev had ridden out of sight that she turned away and offered to help Anna prepare the small matzo balls for the evening meal.

While Esther's nimble fingers performed their tasks, Kurtsev rode to the bank of the river at a hard gallop. He tossed the reins over a branch and slid swiftly from the heaving horse, running his hand over the animal's back, then loosening the girth. He sat down on the grass and gradually sank into the quiet and solitude of the somnolent glade, trying to place the priorities of his life in order. He knew he wanted a home, a wife, children, with God over all. The last was the first, all wrapped up in one and, in some way he could not define, loyalty to the czar and the land of his father was in there too.

His thoughts returned to his father as he had last seen him, a God-fearing man whose God had not protected him from the tortures of Mikhail Dolgorsky's wall. He had seen his father kiss the icon faithfully each morning, but his faith had not saved him. Nor had his Roman Catholic mother been saved, neither she nor her family who were persecuted and killed in the Scottish wars. His innocent sisters had been murdered by venal men and Esther had only been saved by the strength of his own hands. God or no God, she would doubtless have to face just such persecution again, for it seemed to rise with regularity whenever humanity needed a scapegoat. He considered the question of God's existence in his mind and his soul, but he could find no absolutes. He closed his eyes and thought

about the questions he wanted answered until a bird swooped nearby. Its shadow disturbed his concentration because he looked up to search the skies.

If there is a God, he decided, one God must suffice. The God of the universe has to be one God, no matter what He is called or how one worships Him. He thought of Esther in his arms in the river and saw again the red welt of the whip across her breast. His belly tightened. He wanted to protect her from harm—how else could she be the mother of his children and the grandmother of theirs. The thoughts curled inside him with delight, tempered only by the knowledge that he had much study ahead of him. If Esther would consent to be his wife, it would mean he had to become a Jew and although he was way ahead of most converts, he was sure it would take him until Istanbul—if not Holland—to satisfy Menasseh ben Yakov's religious requirements. Certainly Esther would be safest in Holland under the protection of the Bolinski name. Perhaps I can be of service to the czar through the East India Company, Kurtsev thought, still sitting on the grass with head bowed. When he rose to his feet he searched the skies and, with deep feeling, spoke aloud to his father, Alexandr, of love and pride and family. He might have stayed there had his horse not snorted and stamped his feet, impatient to return to camp and his nightly feed. He tightened his saddle girth, leaped to the gelding's back and raced across the fields to find Esther.

The young woman, watching Kurtsev's eager return, decided to be unresponsive. "I am busy getting our meal, as you can see."

Kurtsev grasped her hands, flour and all. "But I must talk to you."

"Perhaps later—after the meal." She smiled at him sweetly.

Kurtsev stepped closer and reached to take the girl in his arms, but she dodged out of his way.

"In the morning I go to the ghetto with the ben Yakovs. I suggest you visit the army garrison for news of your czar and Moscow and Voronezh and the count."

"But I love you, Esther, and I want to tell you of it—and I believe you love me," Kurtsev retorted, moving toward her again.

This time she did not move away. "Oh you think so, do you, Kurtsev Bolinski," she said, half laughing and half crying.

Menasseh and Annastasia, watching from the shadows, took each other by the hand. Anna leaned against her husband. As Esther disappeared under the tree with Kurtsev following her, Anna whispered, "Together again at last."

Chapter Seven

Paul drove the ben Yakov family along the side streets of Rostov. Only the workers were up and about and a few stopped and stared and called out names against them, but they came unharmed to the iron gates of the ghetto, open until dark when all Jews must be locked inside by the guards.

Before Paul waved farewell and turned back toward the caravan, Menasseh reminded him that he had three days to wash his clothes, repair the wagons and rest the stock and, if he worked fast, he might have time to visit the marketplace. The Greek grinned over his shoulder and Menasseh paused to watch him go. The elder was not happy as he looked out over the city. He felt a dark premonition, but said nothing as he led his excited family up the narrow street toward their quarters. Menasseh had brought supplies for some of his customers, but it was too early for the shops to be open. The children stared wide-eyed at the goods displayed behind the windows while Menasseh inspected the wall that enclosed the ghetto and restricted expansion. As the population increased, people were forced to move to other cities or build additional stories on top of buildings which were firetraps to begin with. Empty buckets

hung by hooks near water troughs in case of disaster, inviting the children to stop and dip their fingers inside. Around them in the streets merchants prepared for the last day of trade before the Sabbath and Menasseh, as he always did when he left the open road, wondered how the ghetto synagogues and schools continued to produce scholars in spite of constant harrassment and persecutions.

As the ben Yakovs reached the home of Menasseh's family, Anna said, "I hear our Rostov synagogue even fed Gentiles during the last famine."

Her husband nodded. "Our people seem to lack the capacity to hate," he said gently, as an elderly man welcomed them into his home. He was thin and stoop-shouldered, his hair and long beard were gray and his eyes seemed sunken into his skull. "Come, come—what a family," he said, patting each child on the head. "Eight lovely children, Anna. You are a fruitful woman."

Each member of Menasseh's family, even the youngest, carried a blanket. When they were spread out on the floor of a large bedroom, Menasseh's uncle said proudly, "I have readied a separate room for you and Anna, but before you start your day's activities come and tell me about yourselves and your travels; it has been a year since you were here last."

Anna, wanting to settle her children, bade the men talk without her. Esther, anxious to see the city, asked if she could go to the shops to get a few "necessities" as soon as they opened. William and Tessa clamored to be allowed to go with her and Menasseh, chuckling over their enthusiasm, gave his permission. The other children had found friends and Anna, who felt she could not leave the babies, was perfectly happy exchanging woman-talk with Hannah, the housekeeper.

On impulse Menasseh decided to go with Esther, knowing William would soon have to be carried. He had still not shaken the premonition of evil that followed him into the ghetto. It was hardly reason enough to insist upon staying indoors, but despite Esther and the children's obvious delight in the sound and the smell of the marketplace his face was grim.

Only minutes later Menasseh's premonition became a reality as the eyes of those crowding the alleys of the ghetto silently witnessed his arrest along with that of Esther and his small

children. His uncle, Rabbi David ben Yakov, soon had a full report of the arrest of his good friend and relative. The young Jew who made the report also told him the whereabouts of the Russian, Kurtsev, and of the guards Sampson and Paul. "There is a Bashkir barbarian in town. His name is Neshi and it is said he seeks the young woman Esther who came to your house with Menasseh ben Yakov," the boy went on.

Though the rabbi was old and feeble, he used the eyes and ears of the young people to gather information. "Eat and drink, my son," he said. "When I have thought a while we will call a meeting and decide what to do."

It was not long before he had called a gathering of his closest friends. Old prayers were whispered and parchment scrolls with the handwritten books of the Torah were studied quietly and secretly, for possession of the books of the Torah could mean death. The rabbi allowed himself a thin smile and a smothered curse between prayers when he thought of the self-righteous and ignorant city commander who did not know of the young ghetto boys who dressed and acted as Christians to freely roam the crowded streets. The man's blind hatred of the Jews would not allow even the thought that they could pass as Christians, horned and deformed as they were in his eyes.

The ghetto community was well-organized. The young people, boys and girls alike, studied the Talmud and the Torah and also learned the arts of war and the use of weaponry. The weapons themselves—pitifully few to begin with—were carefully hidden in secret places, but the learning process continued as if there were enough to go around. The boys were organized into groups and trained to move among the populace as Christians; they learned to think in the language of the people and were accepted without question by the gentiles.

Fernando and several youths were sent by the elders to alert Kurtsev, who was waiting at the garrison for Commander Bogden to appear. They took young Sergei with them, even though he was only six years old, for a very young child would make their group even less conspicuous.

Bernardo was sent to warn Sampson and Paul while yet another group of boys, familiar with the palace, were sent on a more dangerous mission, one for which they had been carefully

trained. Carrying the necessary materials in their clothes, they left prepared for arson.

Within the palace Menasseh, Esther, Tessa and William waited for Judge Bogden to send for them. "Why are we here, father? Why is everyone so mean to us?" little William whispered. "Have we done something wrong?"

Esther put her arms around the small boy. "I am sure that we will be sent home soon, William, but meanwhile you must be brave." She looked up at Menasseh. At first glance he appeared calm, but she saw, upon closer examination, a look akin to desperation in his eyes. The only one who was perfectly content was Tessa who had climbed upon her father's lap and fallen asleep.

The courtroom door suddenly opened and a palace guard, carrying an iron lance, motioned for them to rise and follow him into the next room. Beads of sweat broke out on Menasseh's face, and he used his huge neckerchief to mop his forehead and neck, and Esther felt a cold chill run down her spine as she watched him. Her mind flooded with the remembered terror of her recent ordeal and she regretted having allowed herself to lapse too soon into a sense of security. She met the stares of the guards posted inside the door with an even calm she didn't feel, as the little group came forward to join several more guards standing at attention beside the judge.

"Walk forward and then kneel, Jews," one of the guards demanded.

The judge was reading from notes on his desk. He was a fully-bearded man; the light from an upper window reflected on his bony, bald head so that it was not until she was almost within touching distance that Esther could fully see his thin cruel mouth, the lower lip disfigured by blue veins. Dark bags under his eyes completed a look of extreme dissipation. Somehow, lines of evil seemed etched into his face and she was drained of the little courage she had been able to muster. She looked to Menasseh to lend her the courage she lacked and found he was starting to kneel. Before following suit, she looked at the men standing in the nearby shadows, staring boldly at her, and she was about to turn her face away from them when recognition struck her like a blow. Her knees gave way, and she dropped to the floor in a panic, her mind

spinning, and her heart beating like thunder in her ears. It had been but a glance, but she needed no more to recognize the face and stance and the arrogance. Without a doubt the man was Neshi, her barbarian tormentor.

Esther's face dropped into her hands, and she was unable to control her shaking body. Dear God, she thought, he's alive, he's alive!

Menasseh, aware that the young woman's panic more than matched his own, glanced at her with a warning in his eyes.

Commander Bogden, judge and jury, flicked his glance over the kneeling figures before him before reaching out to take a paper from the court clerk. He studied it for a moment. The judge was a defeated Ukrainian who, because he was related to the Russian nobility, had been given this command. His face and demeanor showed his dislike for this assignment, the people in the city, and his hatred for the Jews. He looked down at the bent head of the girl. "Esther, daughter of the Jew, Solomon ben Adhem?" he demanded. When Esther did not respond, he shouted, "Look up at me, girl, when I speak to you."

A guard stepped forward to see that she complied.

When Esther was gazing directly at him, Commander Bogden continued, "Count Dolgorsky gave this girl to the warrior Neshi, as a slave to reward him for his meritorious service in subduing the murdering Jew, Solomon ben Adhem—her father. While the man, Neshi, was unarmed and preparing to claim this girl, she stabbed him with intent to commit murder. The penalty for a slave striking a master is death by torture. This court is perfectly willing to carry out that sentence, but Neshi asks that he be allowed to carry out the sentence himself. The court herewith complies with that request."

Esther, whose senses refused to believe what she was hearing, wanted to scream out her protest—to escape—to somehow run to Kurtsev for protection and help. She tried to speak, but no words would come and Menasseh, seeing her struggle, raised his head and allowed his eyes to plead for a chance to talk.

"Jew, you have no rights in this court," Judge Bogden hissed, interpreting Menasseh's appeal correctly. "This slave

girl is your property," the judge told Neshi, "I give her back into your custody. It is evident that she is dangerous, and I advise you to take care that she does not have further opportunity for rebellion."

Bodgen's glance flashed to the girl, prostrate on the floor before him, then returned to the coarse barbarian whose yellow teeth showed in a wolfish smile. A question flashed across the judge's mind, but he did not ask it. Instead he shrugged and said, "I will need this girl as a witness before you take her." He turned back to Esther. "I advise you to answer quickly and honestly."

Esther, who was in a state of shock, could only nod her head in agreement.

"Did this Jew willingly allow you to travel with his caravan?" the judge demanded.

Esther could only nod her head again.

"Did he know that you were escaping from Count Dolgorsky's judgment?"

The young woman's eyes searched those of her friend who was kneeling with head bowed, an arm around his two small children. Gathering herself together for the first time since she had recognized Neshi, she said simply, "I threw myself on his mercy; I did not want to die."

"What is the name of the man who helped you to escape?" Bogden demanded in a hard voice.

Esther looked up into the cold snake eyes of the judge. There is no way they can make me speak Kurtsev's name, she thought. Then a hand clamped into her shoulder, and as the fingers dug into her flesh, she cried out in terror and despair for someone to save her from the hands of Neshi. Kurtsev's name rose involuntarily from her throat.

"It is enough," the judge said. "She has spoken the name of the traitor who will soon be caught." He turned again to Neshi and imperiously demanded that the man remove his property from the courtroom. He now gave his full attention, in order of priority: to a glass of wine, a bunch of deep purple grapes that had been set beside him, and then to the cowering Menasseh. Sipping the wine and munching on the grapes, the judge studied the man before him. The Jew had been of use in bringing merchandise from far away lands; he also seemed to

have the money to purchase local products for export. Bogden chewed reflectively on a juicy grape and thought somewhat sourly that he never received any of the exotic gifts that were given to the nobles and their ladies.

"What is your full name, Jew?" he demanded, thinking again how much he detested these black-robed men in their black peaked hats, baggy pants, and homespun coats with the yellow label proclaiming them Jews.

"Menasseh ben Yakov, Highness."

"Why did you not report to me upon your arrival?"

"My Sabbath starts this day at sundown; I had only just enough time to take my family to the ghetto. It was my intention to bring tax money and gifts to Your Highness on the second day of the week."

"There are several charges against you, Menasseh ben . . ."

". . . Yakov."

"Yes. These are the charges: You failed to report your arrival in this city, you have harbored a criminal fugitive, one Esther, the daughter of the murderer Solomon ben Adhem; you gave passage to a runaway slave, one Esther; you refused to allow Russian soldiers to search your caravan; you threatened them with violence; you tried to bribe them with contraband whiskey; taxes are due immediately upon entering the city. You have not yet paid them. Added to that, you have now attempted to bribe this court with your talk of gifts—and one more thing—you, a Jew, cannot have slaves or Christians work for you."

Little William, whose foot was bothering him in his cramped and kneeling position, struggled to his feet.

"Teach your offspring to respect this court," the judge screamed at Menasseh who reached out to help the boy. The guard behind the child shoved him roughly to the floor and William bit his lip to keep from crying out. It started to bleed and Tessa, seeing the blood began to weep softly.

"Take the girl from my court. I detest such disturbances," Bogden ordered harshly. A guard immediately grasped Tessa by the wrist with his huge hand and dragged her from the room, ignoring her protesting screams.

Before the door closed, Menasseh's shoulders reflected

despair and resignation. Because his head was bowed he did not see the three soldiers who came into the room to stand next to the judge. When he looked up he recognized the captain in charge of the soldiers who had accepted his liquor.

The judge, motioning the soldiers to a bench at the side of the room, asked, "Have you apprehended the escaped convict Kurtsev Bolinski yet?"

"Not yet, Your Highness," the captain answered.

"You may sit there until I have need of your testimony," the judge directed impatiently. He picked up a paper from his desk and studied it, then called the soldier to come forth.

"Is this the Jew who refused to let you search his caravan?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"You had the authority. Why did you not proceed without his approval?"

"His armed guards outnumbered us, and each had a gun. We had no such weapons and were, therefore, helpless to perform our duty."

The judge gave him a contemptuous look. "You are a fool, captain, to be caught in such an idiotic situation. I will include that in my report, and I will try your case very soon."

The judge turned back to Menasseh. "It is the finding of this court that you are guilty on three counts: treason against Russia in harboring the convict Kurtsev and the slave Esther; avoiding the payment of required taxes; and flagrantly violating the lawful privileges allowed you by keeping armed guards and slaves."

Commander Bogden took a deep breath and stared at Menasseh, waiting for a reaction. The Jew kept his eyes lowered, so that the flame in his soul would not be betrayed by the slightest flick of a muscle as he waited for sentence to be passed.

The judge hammered on his desk and the sound echoed through the silent room. "It is the judgment of this court that your caravan is hereby confiscated. All persons traveling with you are now under arrest and will become the property of this court. Your family will be arrested, and all will be sent to the garrison in Voronezh where you will be subject to judgment and slavery, according to the decision of Count Dolgorsky.

Your friend Kurtsev Bolinski will be found, arrested and delivered to the count, who is most anxious to receive him." He paused for greater effect and attention before he continued.

"It may interest you to know that the count is totally blind as a result of Kurtsev Bolinski's actions against him. It is reported that he can no longer see the torture he orders—but he is able to hear—and enjoy—the screams of his enemies. It is said," he went on, smiling and looking at William, "that he particularly likes the screams of little children—Jewish children."

It could not have been more than thirty seconds after the judge pronounced sentence that the courtroom doors burst open and a palace guard yelled "Fire!" Loud voices sounded from the hallway and the soldiers jumped to their feet and rushed with the judge to the window overlooking the courtyard below.

The judge, his face white with rage, watched his apartment, just across from the courtroom, burn vigorously and turned on the soldiers and yelled, "Run, you fools! Put out that fire!" He stood at the window watching the flames and imagined them moving through his own possessions, completely forgetting Menasseh and his son until a big hand reached around his neck and squeezed his throat hard enough to lift him off his feet. His body jerked and his flailing arms struck out blindly; his head turned and his terror-stricken eyes looked into those of Menasseh ben Yakov before he collapsed to the floor as though dead. But Menasseh had not killed him. He merely rendered the judge unconscious so that his coat could be stripped off before the big door swung open again.

Menasseh turned, now ready to meet in battle whatever threat he must. He was a powerful man and furious at the injustices meted out by the so-called court. Almost blinded by his rage, he moved forward with outstretched arms to grapple with his assailants, even though he knew that the palace guards carried steel lances against which he must be defenseless. He almost collapsed when he saw Sampson walking toward him, Tessa in his arms. With a huge smile the big Greek looked down at the unconscious judge and placed the joyful child into her father's outstretched arms. William clung to his father's legs and Menasseh, knowing that every second increased their

danger, nonetheless stopped to express his gratitude. Sampson shook off his thanks and asked for instructions:

"Help me remove this man's coat. I will wear it when we go out onto the street. He shall wear my cloak and we must hold him as though he is our prisoner," Menasseh ordered.

It took but a few moments to effect the change and, dragging the dazed judge between them and half carrying the children, they left the courtroom. By that time flames were stabbing through the eaves and all of the palace guards and the soldiers, including those called from the garrison, were fully occupied.

The judge, robed in the Jew's coat with the yellow patch on the breast, had gained full consciousness. He jerked free and ran screaming toward the mounted soldiers, commanding them to stop, waving his arms, and demanding that they obey him. Seeing only a demented Jew, they took delight in charging into him with their horses, shouting, "Jew—Jew—Jew!" They passed him by, knocking him down until he lay at last on the paving stones, a crumpled pile of rags slowly dying in the clothing of the people he so despised.

"Your wife and family are on the way with the caravan, sir," Sampson said, leading the way back with William in his arms.

Menasseh gripped the Greek's hand. "Thank you, my friend. I am glad they are moving, we must make it into Azov before daylight. The only problems now are Kurtsev and Esther. I can't leave them."

"Steps have been taken to save her," Sampson said, "and look over there." He pointed down the street to a group of boys heckling a stoop-shouldered Jew, hitting him with sticks and stones, and laughing. The old man shuffled along, covering his face protectively with his arms. Menasseh recognized one of the boys as his own young son Sergei, dressed as a Christian. "It is Kurtsev dressed as a Jew; our boys are driving him toward our camp," Sampson said in a low voice.

Menasseh chuckled. He should have known Kurtsev would find a way to escape.

They were on the outskirts of the city. When they reached the river, Kurtsev removed his disguise and Menasseh's boys whispered farewell to their ghetto friends. Menasseh pulled Kurtsev aside and told him about Esther. "The Bashkir camp, is it far away?" Kurtsev asked.

Menasseh shook his head and immediately gave directions to the young Russian.

"I'll catch up with you when I find Esther," Kurtsev said.

Sampson offered to go with him; but Kurtsev refused both help and his offer of a knife. He had already formulated a plan which required neither. Sampson understood. He lifted Tessa and once more led the way toward the fleeing caravan.

Kurtsev squared his shoulders and moved in the opposite direction.

Esther was tied by the hands to the wheel of a cart. She had no choice but to observe Neshi's two companions as they loaded their gear and listen to their talk. Their conversation boded her no good, but there was little else she could do.

"Is Neshi going to give his slave girl a dagger again to show us how brave he is?" one of the men taunted. They both laughed.

"Yes, she is so big and strong, and you with your injured arm. Maybe we should tame her for you—so that you will be safe."

Neshi grabbed up a club with his good hand and raised it to strike out at his tormentors, but they laughingly dodged out of his way. The injured arm became so painful at the sudden movement that it brought sweat to his forehead. This girl is the cause of much trouble, he thought viciously. I've been made to look a fool by her. Is she worth it? If I take her with me, she will undoubtedly be a burden. Then, too, the men will likely fight over her when I tire of her. She's more trouble than she's worth, he decided. He could always get another woman, one who would not interfere with keeping his men in order. He contemplated tying her to a tree; then, what with the summer-dry grass, it would be a simple matter to set the tree afire. No one could stop him, for she was his to do with as he pleased. Her screams might partly atone for his pain and help him save face with his men.

Neshi sat in the shade of a tree with his rye whiskey until his companions rejoined him. They had been drinking all morning and were just drunk enough to tell a series of foolish private jokes that caused them hilarity and further loosened their tongues. But laughter and chatter stopped dead when the

warrior got up slowly and untied the girl from the wagon's wheel. They watched in silence as he jerked her to the tree he had selected. It was not until he tied her hands behind its trunk, wrapped the strong slender rope around her feet and gathered brush to pile around her feet that the men began to truly comprehend his purpose.

"Neshi, you son of a pig, we have a right to the girl if you don't want her. You said we would share. How can we share if you burn her up?" one of them shouted.

They staggered to their feet, finding it difficult to stand erect. One of them pulled a knife from his belt, another a sword. Boxing Neshi between them, they demanded that he untie the captive.

Neshi drew his knife and would have thrown it, but he was too late. The sword came down on his skull and split it to the shoulders. Neshi crumpled to the dust at Esther's feet, his blood draining into the thirsty earth.

Suddenly cold sober, the men stood and contemplated what they had done. "We'd better leave," one of them said.

The other nodded. "Let's light the fire first, and it will burn both of them."

"The girl too?"

"Yes. She's a witness to the murder."

The man dropped his knife and reached for his tinderbox. He was bending over the dried grass and brush when he heard a grunt from his companion. He looked up and saw the bear killer, the Russian, the one who had rescued this girl once before. Seeing his friend drop to the ground, his neck twisted and broken, he reached for his sword and tried to scramble to his feet. He was too late. A boot caught him on the side of his neck, and he rolled onto his back, his equilibrium momentarily gone. He felt himself caught up and raised above the Russian's head. Suddenly his arms were kicking and his legs flailing. Fighting to save himself he caught a glimpse through the tree tops of a very blue sky; it was one of the last things he saw in life, before he was dropped like a stone across a hard, bent knee and his back snapped like a broken twig. He fell over onto his face, staring wide-eyed into the ground, his mouth open in a soundless scream. A trail of ants crawled by his face—all the light faded with his life.

It took Kurtsev but a moment to free Esther. She threw herself into his arms, nearly knocking him over. He held on to her tightly, murmuring soft, unintelligible words of comfort. At last he held her away from him, took her hand and led her across a shallow stream to the far bank where they found Bernardo waiting with horses.

"Sampson said you would be about here," he grinned. "We must hurry. The caravan will travel all night to reach the safety of Azov by morning."

While Kurtsev, Esther and Bernardo made their way back to the caravan, the Russian captain whose men had taken Menasseh's liquor reluctantly made his way back to Commander Bogden's courtroom. The fire at the palace had consumed the whole wing of the building, including the judge's quarters. The captain and his men were exhausted, dirty, and afraid. The captain, already on report, would have to stand trial and here was yet another failure—the inability to save the judge's apartment. It would not exactly help his case. Just then the palace guards carried in a body from the street. The judge, barely alive, bloody and broken, was gently deposited on the floor. When the palace guards straightened up, they stood at attention and saluted the captain.

"Sir, with commander—the judge—Bogden seriously injured, you are in command of this garrison," one of the men said, standing at attention and looking straight ahead.

The captain felt a rising exhilaration at his reprieve. It took him no more than a moment to adjust, then he said briskly, "Take your posts, men. I will call an emergency meeting shortly."

After they were gone, he turned to his own men; they were all grinning. He looked down at the judge and knelt on the floor. Bogden's bruised and bleeding lips were moving slightly and the captain bent his ear close to make out the words. The sounds were garbled, so he bent closer still.

In a hoarse whisper, the judge gave his final order: "Have all the Jews barricaded in the ghetto and burn them—burn them—and that captain is a fool—have him whipped—then—shot." He caught his breath, gasped, and was still.

The captain's face was white. He walked over to the witness bench and sat down. His men stood looking at him, waiting.

They had not been able to make out the judge's words. Explaining, could see that their leader was shaken. not

"The Jews are observing their Sabbath," he said at last. "They could have had no part in this burning. Go fetch me the court clerk." He stood up and began to pace the floor.

The clerk came meekly into the room, his records book in hand. The captain faced him, his feet slightly apart, and his hands caught together behind his back.

"The judge has just made a dying statement to which we were all witnesses. You are to write down my words. First, the fire was accidental, and no one can be blamed. Second, new evidence shows that Menasseh ben Yakov is innocent of the earlier charges made against him." He paused. "Add to that," he went on calmly, "that the captain has performed loyal service in helping to control the fire, and therefore, all other matters referring to him shall be stricken from the records."

The clerk was writing as fast as he could. He was sweating as his glance went from the bloody face of the judge to the grim and forbidding face of the captain. There was doubt in his eyes. The soldier took hold of his shirt front and raised him on to his toes.

"I am now the commander—and I will remain so until Czar Peter sends a replacement, which he may very well not do, what with a war with Charles of Sweden on his hands. Can I hope for your cooperation?"

The clerk nodded and swallowed convulsively.

"Then prepare Judge-Commander Bogden's dying statement. We will all witness it." He looked severely into the clerk's eyes. "Including yourself," he added. "Are you agreeable?"

"Yes, sir! Your honor sir!" the clerk blurted out. He turned and disappeared into his office.

The captain turned to his men. "Are there any who disagree with what has just happened?" He looked into the eyes of each one. "Good. Now it is best that this day be forgotten. My report will say that the judge met with an accident from runaway horses while he was crossing the street."

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Chapter Eight

Bernardo led Kurtsev and Esther toward the sea. By nightfall they caught up with the caravan which had stopped for dinner a short distance from the Don and was well-hidden among the trees that grew abundantly along the river's bank. Small cooking fires were burning, and the delicious odor of cooking food mixed with the fragrant wood smoke. With the memories of the judge and Neshi happily behind them, the two young people began to relax. Kurtsev looked at Esther riding astride her horse. Her skirts were bunched around her legs and the gleaming white satin of her calves showed tantalizingly. He saw that Bernardo, just old enough to show an interest in females, occasionally glanced at the girl who was, indeed, a beautiful sight. Her hair streamed in the breeze as they galloped along. She rode with a natural grace and ability, relaxed and moving to the rhythm of the horse beneath her. Her face was glowing and radiant with health, despite the ordeals that seemed to have become a part of her life. Esther was amazingly resilient. Soon, he thought, she would be in the safety of her brother's care. He might never see her again. The thought jarred him, and he looked searchingly at her again,

thinking what a good companion she was, never complaining, enjoying everything along the way. The idea of parting was not pleasant and he was not sorry when they came over a rise and looked down at the camp below.

Sampson and Menasseh walked forward to greet them, the children ran ahead, chattering and laughing in welcome. Menasseh's voice rose above their eager questions. "Now, children," he called out, "let the questions wait until our friends have eaten. Come Esther, Kurtsev, the food awaits."

The riders dismounted, and their horses were led away. Anna put her arm around Esther and led her to the campfire, exclaiming at the raw skin on her wrists where ropes had injured the flesh. Kurtsev moved up to the fire and took Esther's hands in his, his throat working as he looked at her torn flesh. He resolved that no harm would ever come to her again, not while he lived. He turned away speechlessly as Anna reached for the girl's wrists to apply a healing unguent.

"Kurtsev?" Esther's voice caught him as he turned.

"Esther, I promise no harm will come to you ever again if you stay at my side," he said, swinging around to face her again.

She looked intently into his eyes, then laughed lightly. "Are you suggesting that I tag along with you like a slave, Kurtsev? Are you claiming me as booty? You have killed my captor, and are my rightful owner under your Russian law. You have saved me from certain death twice. Do you now consider me to be your—property?"

Daylight had gone and the small fire did not give off enough light for him to read her eyes; neither of them noticed that when Anna finished her ministrations she turned away to sit beside Menasseh. Eyes twinkling, she squeezed Menasseh's hand, delighted at Esther's guile.

As for Kurtsev, he was shaken. He looked into the faces of his friends, and was annoyed that their laughter was held in check purely out of courtesy and regard for him. Embarrassed, his eyes went to Esther again, who was waiting patiently for his response to her teasing. Or was she teasing? He must make a decision about her. He had often wondered how he would know the right moment—and the right girl. Esther would not turn him down or reject his suit. Of that he was confident! Had

she not shown her willingness to be with him, in fact to seek him often.

Now he looked down at her and suddenly remembered the river, how she had lain in his arms, naked. When she regained consciousness she had pressed even closer to him.

He had had many affairs. Girls frequently flirted with him—Russian girls, girls with parents of influence and wealth. His mother had even spoken with him about one in particular; marriage had been discussed between his parents and hers.

He moved restlessly at the thought that to consider marrying a Jewess would have then been unthinkable, despite his father's friendship with Solomon ben Adhem.

He still had his duty to clear his father's name! A marriage such as this would make that well-nigh impossible. And what of re-establishing his claim to his father's land? Although he could not understand why, he had witnessed, firsthand, the hatred and contempt in which the Jews were held. His friendship with Esther's brothers and with her parents, as well as with Esther and all of Menasseh's family had only increased his lack of understanding of the hatred some held for Jews. Could it be because the Jews had crucified a Jew seventeen hundred years ago? How long did hatred last? He, for one, felt a warm affection for them. Sampson and Paul and others who knew them intimately felt the same way he did. His father, a Russian, had married a Scottish girl. That had been acceptable—and a happy alliance. Thus his thoughts churned as he looked at Esther, the girl he loved—and wanted.

Esther watched his emotions flicker across Kurtsev's face, and understood them thoroughly. Quietly she put her hands in his and the light and laughter left her face as her eyes questioned his.

"My sweet little one," Kurtsev began. "I am willing to be your slave." Holding her hand, he turned to Anna and Menasseh and his face broke into a big smile. "I want to have a happy family like yours—if Esther will be my wife."

Esther looked searchingly into his face, but said nothing.

Quickly they were enclosed in a crowd of enthusiastic well-wishers. Sampson's hand gripped Kurtsev's like a band of steel. Paul and Menasseh slapped him on the back and the women came forward with their good wishes and laughter.

Little Teresa went to get her violin to share in what had become a celebration at the promise of a marriage.

Kurtsev's laughing eyes sought Esther's, but she was nowhere to be seen. He took a step toward her wagon, but Anna put a hand on his arm. "She has gone to rest. She will return soon. Have patience, my friend. She is honored at your proposal, but—there must be no doubts, or it will not be a happy union."

She handed him a plate of food, and he looked toward Esther's wagon.

"Food has already been taken to her, Kurtsev. It is good that you think of her hunger before your own, but for now, my friend, be patient."

Kurtsev sat upon a log, his appetite gone, and his mind was filled with regrets. Esther had read his thoughts—as she had done so many times before, of that he was somehow sure. She had read his doubts! She had been ready to accept him, of that he was also positive. She had the fire and courage of his Scottish mother, and had proven herself capable of discipline under the most cruel of circumstances. Still she was not a hard woman, but a tender, loving girl who carried happiness with her wherever she went.

The fires died down. When only a small eye of coal was left, a cool draft of air came up from the sea and the camp was at last silent. Kurtsev walked around the forms of those wrapped in blankets, stretched out on the ground around him. A covering had been laid beside him, too, but he had been too absorbed in his own thoughts to notice. In a few hours all the caravan's goods would be loaded onto the ships waiting in the harbor; ships that had been commissioned by Menasseh to carry his merchandise.

Kurtsev walked for a while before he wrapped the blanket about him and stretching alongside a log to rest, was soon asleep.

It took Esther longer to fall asleep. She had known that Kurtsev was going to ask her to marry him and realized that it would be awkward. She had delighted in teasing him because he was so decisive and confident in matters of the world. She and Katya had spent many hours talking of love and romance and marriage. Katya's mother had laughingly told them how

difficult it had been for Kurtsev's father to speak of his love. Now she had made it too easy for Kurtsev. She had planned that they should marry soon, but now she had seen and understood his doubts. It had shattered her confidence in the rightness of their union. She was a Jewess! His family had been her friends, and now they too, had been destroyed. His father, mother and sisters were dead. All their lands were forfeited—and even Kurtsev, himself, was a hunted man with a price on his head. All because of her!

She had been foolish to imagine they could be together always. Every time he looked at her in years to come, he would be reminded of the loss of his family, his good name, and his property. True, as a young man he had responded to her selfish wishes and to her words that had in fact embarrassed him in public.

Her hands came up to cover her face and tears flowed between her fingers as she wept. How was she to right this terrible wrong? She could not face him after all her conniving.

There was more than one ship headed for Amsterdam—she must not be on the same ship as Kurtsev. Never could she endure being close to him without giving herself away. Anna would help her, and in time—much time—she would learn to live without him. She buried her face in the pillow to smother her weeping, and at last fell into a deep exhausted sleep.

Anna stood outside the wagon, listening to Esther's sobs. Reluctantly she decided not to break in upon the girl's privacy; there would be time for talk later. Esther had gone through experiences that could destroy reason, but she had survived. Her tears stemmed from multiple causes; it was well to let them wash away the anguish. The girl and Kurtsev, the Russian, were meant for each other, though their religions differed. She went quietly back to lie beside her husband who put his big arm over her protectively and possessively. He had been awake and was waiting for her return.

An early start brought the caravan to the port by sunup. There were many ships. Two were held at the dock by men awaiting the arriving caravan—ships flying the flags of Holland. Their cargo had been unloaded and they were sitting high in the water, their three masts reaching up into the sky.

One at a time, the wagons pulled alongside the gangplank. The waiting crews began unloading the goods into the ships. Kurtsev worked with Sampson, keeping the wagons in line. As one was unloaded, it pulled away and another took its place.

Anna took Esther and the other women on board and set them to readying their quarters for the long voyage ahead. As the day wore on, the heat became oppressive, and all the men were wet with the sweat of their labors. Menasseh and Paul inspected the loading and securing of the cargo. They decided to set some of it aside for better storing, much to the disgust of the captain and his mates who were getting hoarse from shouting and pushing the men to greater efforts.

The empty wagons were pulled into the shade of huge warehouses where cargoes from many ships and goods from the manufacturing centers of England and the great cities of the continent, were stored. There were ready-made clothes, cloth, shoes, boots, and all kinds of metal products. The Amsterdam stockholders would be well-satisfied with the profits of this thriving enterprise.

At last the men gathered in the warehouse for lunch. Menasseh, Kurtsev, and Sampson sat together, eating their bread and cheese and washing it down with a good red wine from Italy. "Are we likely to be followed here by the soldiers?" Kurtsev asked.

"I doubt that we will see any Russians here. Azov was won from them through a peace treaty almost three years ago. They will not venture into Turkish territory."

Kurtsev drew a deep breath. "You mean we are out of Russia?" He felt sudden, quite violent and mixed emotions. They were safe from the Count Dolgorsky! But his gut twisted in a kind of anguish to think that he had left his home and was hunted and disgraced. He felt the loss of his lands and family. His thoughts steadied. At least Esther was safe, and he could always go back—when the time came.

Menasseh's deep voice interrupted his thoughts. "Yes, we are now in the land of Sultan Ahmed III. I knew his father, Mohamed IV. For many years our commerce through his lands has been good for the Turks and for us. We will sail briefly into Istanbul—and perhaps you will even meet the sultan." His chuckle rolled from deep in the cavern of his big chest.

Kurtsev marveled at this merchant. His mind was keenly developed, and he seemed to have been everywhere, to know so many people. The whole operation of the caravan and the ship loading was the product of his organization and planning. He was a successful independent businessman. The Dutch East India Company supplied the ships and he provided the merchandise. With all of his responsibilities, he had time for his wife and each of his children; he held school for them, and taught them Judaic values, imbuing his small family with the faith of his fathers. Kurtsev looked upon Menasseh with ever growing respect and affection. With all the bitterness and hatred emanating from men in the world, it was those like Menasseh who gave mankind value.

The men rose from their noontime rest to face a long afternoon and evening of hard work, so that the ships could leave for their dawn sailing. The sultan's officers were on hand to keep order. They checked cargoes, and collect fees; and there were gifts for the sultan that had to be opened, examined, and sealed. Menasseh was everywhere it seemed, and Kurtsev went with him.

"Someday, Kurtsev, you will be in charge of a caravan and you will need to know every part of the responsibilities. None can be delegated, for no one but you will have the authority," Menasseh explained.

All day and well into the night their labors continued. Torches were placed where work was going on, and at last the weary men had completed the task. As the dawn's breezes sprang up, the sails were unfurled, and gently ballooned as they caught the winds. Men called from the ship to those ashore. The mates' shouts could be heard as the lines were loosened and the ships slowly moved out into the bay. Their course was set for Istanbul.

Kurtsev had not once caught sight of Esther and finally appealed to Sampson, questioning the girl's whereabouts.

"She is helping Anna, my friend," the Greek smiled. "Do not feel so bad. It makes you look like a sick nanny looking for her kid."

Kurtsev stared after the chuckling Greek. He was concerned about Esther. Could it be that she was purposely avoiding him? He was not even sure that she was on the ship. He walked

along the deck, noticing, despite his confusion, the skill of the sailors as they climbed the rigging and responded to the orders of the first mate. He stopped to lean against the cannon where it was lashed to its moorings with neat boxes of ball and shot alongside. This was a first-rate ship. The men on it were well-trained, and probably well-paid, too. Everyone spoke Dutch, and Kurtsev knew that he must learn the language. Perhaps he and Esther could learn it together. The ship was quiet, even the men worked silently. There was a faint shout in the wind now and then, but almost all of the people from the caravan were asleep, as far as he could tell. He, too, had worked all day and night, and he was tired. Sampson, Paul and a few others shared his quarters and he envied the deep breathing of those around him. As he pulled the light blanket over him, his last thoughts were of Esther.

At mid-morning the following day, after a good meal, Kurtsev walked to the forward deck. The sails were full, and the sky a deep blue. The warm breezes carried the smell of the sea and he felt spray from the wake of their sister ship, her white foam tail spread out for them to follow. He leaned on the rail and breathed deeply, wishing Esther were at his side. It was not until later, when he went up the stairs, that he saw Menasseh with his family gathered in a circle about him. Seated there were Anna, Esther, and the children. School was in session.

"Come, Kurtsev, join our class. We are learning about the trip ahead," Menasseh smiled.

Kurtsev's eyes turned to Esther who was looking down at her hands. "Esther?" he asked quietly.

She looked up at him, her eyes remote, "Good morning, Kurtsev," she said, turning to help William control a paper that was blowing in the breeze.

Kurtsev stood shocked, torn between violent anger and deep hurt. He had been right; she had read his doubts the other night. Well, if she was too proud to overlook momentary doubt, she did not understand his need of her. Oh, to hell with it, he thought.

"No, Menasseh, not right now. I must help Sampson."

He swung away down the rolling deck.

Esther watched his back as it disappeared, her eyes sick.

Anna looked at Menasseh, and there passed between them a look of ancient understanding. "Now, attention to your father, my children," she said, smiling faintly at the stubbornness of youth.

Kurtsev did not see Esther again for two days. While he was busy helping with the rigging of the sails, on the early morning of the third day out, he began to think desperately of ways and means of reaching her and of somehow explaining his initial hesitation. Despite everything, he felt better than he had in a long time. His hands were becoming hardened and calloused from his constant work with the ropes. His awkwardness around the ship was getting less noticeable as he climbed, pulled, steered and worked at the thousand and one things that constantly needed doing on a sailing vessel.

"I am glad that you have decided to come with us to Holland, my friend," Menasseh told him many times, thinking, you and little Esther will make a good young family there. "You will make a fine addition to the Dutch East India Company, and what is more, I think you will be better able to help your czar from there than if you remained here, at war."

"If your company considers strength and willingness desirable assets, I offer them gladly, but I still have my duty to the czar and my country. That must remain my first duty," Kurtsev said.

"Your father was both wise and successful; no one can take his place. I cannot replace him, but I can give my own experience to you as if you were my son. I promise you that your first responsibility to my enterprise, the Dutch East India Company, will be the disbursement of food and clothes and war materials. Those things that would be meant for Sweden's King Charles can be diverted and sold elsewhere and that could mean victory for Czar Peter and restitution of your status in Russia. The name Bolinski would regain its former place with him, and your loyalty could no longer be questioned."

"You think that will work?"

"No one has complete authority to direct such a great flow of merchandise, but I could and would support such a plan. Of course you would have to show the company a profit equal to the one they will lose from Sweden."

Kurtsev had always thought of war as front line battles, hand-to-hand encounters, shouts of victory from the throats of his comrades. Menasseh's plan opened a new vista of service without sword and shield.

"You are indeed wise, Menasseh," he smiled. "I will gladly accept your suggestions, and I think you are right—war can be won without a sword."

Menasseh clapped him on the shoulder. "Now come, my friend, and join our class. There is much to learn about the ports we will enter and about their rulers. I think, too, you will be pleased to see my other students—one of them at least."

Several families had gathered for instruction and Esther sat among them. When she looked up and smiled and shifted slightly to make room for Kurtsev to sit beside her, he was dazed. She was acting as though nothing was wrong. He glanced quickly at Menasseh and moved to sit beside her, puzzled by the brilliant smile she gave him. The effect she wanted it to have on him was lost, for suddenly the anguish he had felt at the thought that she was lost to him became outrage. She had humiliated him by walking out in the middle of his proposal. So far she had not said she would marry him, and she seemed perfectly oblivious to his comfort and ideas. Surely his mother would have called her a headstrong lass for following him without being asked. She needed to learn that she would need to follow *his* direction.

Menasseh began to speak. Kurtsev leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped before him, trying to focus his attention on Menasseh's words while making sure there was no contact with the girl on his right.

"As you all know, our first stop will be Istanbul. We must rehearse how to act before the sultan—in case we get to see him. Children, you have met royalty before, but each country has its own protocol. It is important that the court requirements be met gracefully and naturally in both action and response. A breach of etiquette could be most serious for our mission. We Jews are rarely allowed an audience, we are certainly never forgiven the slightest mistake. Our people in Istanbul will help us meet the requirements of the court of Ahmed III, but there is much to learn and never a better time to start than the present."

The children groaned. I do say that often, he admitted to himself, wanting to laugh but pretending to look stern. He turned to Anna for confirmation of his wisdom. It was not to be. Little Yuri was toddling over to sit beside Esther; his steps were uncertain to begin with and, what with the movement of the ship, he could barely keep his balance. Menasseh could not help but smile as Esther reached out and gathered the little boy lovingly into her arms.

"It would seem you have competition for Esther's attentions, Kurtsev," Menasseh said dryly. Seeing the Russian's expression, he made a decision. "Your mother will continue your teaching, children. I have other matters to deal with." He turned to Kurtsev, stood up and motioned for the young man to follow.

Kurtsev glanced at Esther, but she was apparently intent on cuddling Yuri and hearing Anna's instructions, so he rose and followed Menasseh to the outer deck. The two men stood at the rail watching the wake of their sister ship ahead of them and Menasseh pointed out the coastline to the north.

"Kurtsev, I need to tell you more about the company. Before long you will receive stock, and then you will be a small partner in our very large company. There are many stockholders. Though we help one another, we are all independent and have our own caravans."

"You did not call me out here to talk about caravans, Menasseh," Kurtsev said soberly.

Menasseh shook his head.

"Why then?"

"There are many things to be said," Menasseh replied quietly. "And you must have questions."

This time it was Kurtsev who nodded.

"Then ask, my son. As I told the children, there's never a better time than the present."

"The Jews have become integrated into the countries where they live," Kurtsev began slowly. "How do you manage to keep your identity?"

"Our identity is not simply a question of race; it encompasses many things. Yes, we are devoted to our God, Jehovah, and to His prophets Abraham and Moses, but Judaism is much more than that. It is our greatest duty to maintain strong family ties."

"But there must be intermarriage."

"Yes, but less than you think. We must band together if we are to survive."

"Why so little?"

"Even in Holland we are not considered citizens. Nowhere can our children attend public schools. As a father, I must provide clothes and shelter, but further than that, I must also educate my children in religion, social behavior—and also the arts and sciences."

"Your wife teaches them too."

"She does—and she makes their clothes and I their shoes."

"And what if you are rich?"

"We contribute to the synagogue, so that funds are available for those who are less fortunate—those who are driven away from their homes, but escape being taken as slaves. It happens all the time, as you have so recently seen, my friend."

"Wouldn't it be easier for your people to accept Christianity?"

"Some do—to survive—very few. They are called New Christians. There are those who have changed their names to escape from Spain and Portugal."

"From the Inquisition?"

Menasseh nodded and went on.

"They go to foreign countries, hide their true identities, worship in secret. If they are caught it means death."

"You seem to have friends in virtually every nation," Kurtsev commented.

"We have some things that the nobility desire—we're advanced in medicine and science, we have useful mechanical expertise, we build solid factories—our commerce has extended to most parts of the world, now, and our goods are much in demand. Few people are aware that we even occasionally loan money to governments at a lower interest rate than they can get at their own banks which charge as much as four hundred percent." Mehasseh chuckled softly. "The Catholic Church also charges a high rate of interest—that's how they've accumulated many of their properties, from those who cannot pay. We charge less than half that interest, despite the risk of not getting paid back at all."

Kurtsev's head began to ache almost as much as his heart. It

would take him a while, he thought, to fully comprehend the information with which Menasseh was bombarding him.

"I am but one of many merchants in our company, Kurtsev," the elder continued. "The stockholders are by and large Jews, but you have much to offer, and with my support and recommendation, you will be welcomed."

There was a shout from high above them in the rigging. When both men looked aloft they saw the seaman on watch point to the skyline of Istanbul.

Menasseh showed the Russian the view ahead—to the far horizon where clouds hung over the city and shifted with the brisk wind of the Black Sea. The minarets were the first to appear. Menasseh's hair and beard blew in the breeze, and his eyes filled with zest and excitement as he told of the fabled city. "For eleven hundred years this city has flowered and glittered like a rare jewel in the dark. It was the first Christian city, and even after others flourished it remained, for centuries, the strongest in the world. When the dark ages covered Europe, Istanbul kept Greek art, Roman law and Christianity alive. The Mohammedans tried to capture it, so did the Turks. They all failed until the Latins finally invaded and plundered the city, but they, too, were driven eventually out. In 1453 a new force closed in on it—tens of thousands of Ottoman Turks, fierce warriors. They successfully marched against the golden city and captured it."

"Tell me about Mohammed," Kurtsev asked fascinated.

Menasseh shifted his feet to brace himself against the roll of the ship. It was Kurtsev's first trip on a Dutch ship. This one had been built and berthed at Zaandam, the greatest of all ship-building centers in Holland. He knew that Czar Peter had made a personal study of the ships built there that he might improve his own. The Dutch vessels were well-built, well-armed, and faster than the French and English ships, and they maneuvered more easily because of their lighter construction.

"It is thought Mohammed the Prophet," he said finally, "was born in Mecca about five hundred and seventy in the year of our Lord. A thousand years later, tens of thousands of his followers stormed the city—and took it." He shouted to be heard above the noise of the wind in the sails and rigging; the

sails were full and great waves rolled to one side as the bow cut deeply into them.

"How do your people get along with the Turks?" Kurtsev yelled, cupping his hands to be heard.

"There are several thousand of our people living here. There is no ghetto, and we are allowed to own homes wherever we can afford them. Our people have been encouraged to help in the restoration of the city. I suppose the Ottomans also like the help we're giving them in restoring the commerce of the country."

At that moment Esther and Anna came down deck toward them, rolling with the ship's motion and laughing exuberantly. Kurtsev moved to help them steady their steps and they all leaned against the rail to watch the brilliance of the red sunset. Billowing clouds on the western horizon caught and reflected the setting sun.

"There will be good wind," Menasseh said.

Esther turned and put her arm through Kurtsev's. She leaned her head against his shoulder, enjoying the spray from the bow plunging against the waters. It brought the cool mist of the sea against her face and glistened on her cheek. Kurtsev looked down at the dark head cuddled against him. Spray sparkled in the braids that wound about her head like a coronet and he leaned slightly forward to touch the coolness of the mist on her hair with his lips. Esther looked up and smiled, her teeth white against her olive skin. Her heart leaped to meet the expression in his eyes, but she made to withdraw her arm from his in swift retreat. He gripped her hand and turned more fully toward her, completely forgetting that they were not alone. His other arm went to her slender waist to hold her fast so that she could not withdraw, and he bent his head and touched his lips to hers. Their kiss was tender, and then demanding of a response as Kurtsev shifted to more fully enclose Esther in his embrace. His eyes glowed and his body seemed to swell jubilantly as he put both hands to her waist and lifted her high over his head.

"Say you'll marry me, you tormenting little Jewess, or over the side you'll go!"

With his feet spread to balance himself, Kurtsev carried

Esther easily to the rail and, with mock threat, made to throw her overboard.

Screaming with the mixed delight of the kiss and his grasp and involuntary fear at the sight of the churning white foam below, Esther grabbed a handful of the Russian's blowing red hair, and tried to squirm away from the swiftly running water below. "You Russian barbarian, you throw me and you'll go with me—and we'll have our marriage at the bottom of the sea. Let me down, let me down!" she yelled.

Gently Kurtsev replaced her on the damp-wooden deck.

He had heard the words he wanted to hear and, for the moment at least, it was enough.

Chapter Nine

"Do we go ashore at once when we reach the harbor," Kurtsev asked Menasseh who was grinning at the two young people.

"We do. You two don't," Menasseh said quietly. "At least not to Istanbul."

Kurtsev looked puzzled and this time Anna and Menasseh laughed out loud.

"I think I understand what my devious husband has in mind," Anna smiled. "Over there, to portside, you can see our family's vacation island, just right for a honeymoon."

"But do I not need to study, to convert, before Esther and I are married?"

"The major studies involve learning Hebrew. You already know our language, thanks to Esther's brothers. We live in troubled times—I was up all night studying the Talmud, and since you are already a Jew in spirit, I will risk the wrath of our God and use my rabbinical wisdom to make my own talmudic decision. If you can read from the Talmud, you will have your Bar Mitzvah today and I will marry you before the sun comes up in the morning."

Esther had always dreamed of a wedding just like her mother's. She had heard all the details many times over, and cherished the memories. She often visualized her father, handsome, tall and strong, and her mother, regal and beautiful. The rabbi and their friends were present to show their love and witness the solemn vows.

As her mother had reached back into her past to relive the precious moments for her daughter, Esther had imagined herself standing beside the man of her dreams, a faceless Jew whose love she was ready to share. Now she saw the face of reality. The man she wanted to spend all of her life with, was a Russian Catholic; the man who filled her thoughts, her desires, and her eyes, was the red-haired son of a Protestant Scot. There was no rabbi, no Catholic priest, or Protestant minister who would not frown on such a union, holding up a hand in restraint with dire predictions of unhappiness. Assuredly it was the end of her own dreams of a traditional Jewish wedding such as her mother's. Her mind cast doubts, but her heart shouted her love.

She considered life without Kurtsev. It was unthinkable; she already belonged to him, if for no other reason than that he had twice saved her from the barbarian Neshi. There would have been no choice had Kurtsev not brought her away; she belonged to him in fact as well as in heart. But it was more than all that. She had known him as a child. She had grown up with his sister Katya and remembered well the times he had let the two little girls wrestle with him gently—letting them win. And she had been as a daughter to his mother and father. His had been a home filled with love, tenderness and happiness. As a woman she knew there would never be any other man who had such meaning in her life. Her final commitment to marry him cleared her mind of anxiety; she could do nothing else, for he was her first love—and her last—forever.

Menasseh and Anna's offer cemented Esther's decision. Menasseh, in his role of rabbi, was greatly honored to perform the marriage of the daughter of his friend Solomon, as long as the rites were performed according to the laws of the land and of the Talmud. He gave his blessing to them both. Had not the young Russian giant saved the girl from certain slavery when

her father had been murdered? Had he not saved the lives of many hundred of Jews when he escaped from prison? Had not his own loved ones befriended Esther's family?

"Adversity has brought you together, and your lives are irrevocably intertwined. You do belong together, it would seem," Menasseh said gently.

And so, as their ship's sails filled with the gentle wind of the Bosphorus, they set their course through the Golden Horn. Kurtsev, before a minyan of ten Jews, read from the Torah while Anna prepared a gown for Esther from petticoats and sails. At midnight Kurtsev and Esther stood hand in hand and were married in a room filled with children and happiness. Their friends gave them what small gifts they could and the traditional breaking of the glass underfoot sealed their vows in a moment of almost awesome silence.

Since Menasseh and his party were expected in Istanbul soon after dawn and the sun was already making overtures to the moon, a boat was lowered and Kurtsev lifted his bride in and raised the sail to point the small craft toward their honeymoon island. Esther sat in the bow and the spray covered her face and hair without obscuring her radiant smile of happiness as they approached their destination. Tall trees were silhouetted against the sky and birds flew overhead, wheeling in great circles and crying their welcome to the approaching boat.

A servant waited on a small dock. Kurtsev dropped the sail and tossed a line to the man's outstretched hand and, once the boat was secure, he lifted Esther to the shore.

Hand in hand they followed the path that led to a cottage and the servant followed, humming soft Greek melodies of love. The cottage was old but in good repair; the wood floors shone with polish, and it was furnished with an assortment of rare antiques gathered by Menasseh on his travels. Beautiful paintings and tapestries hung on the walls, and thick Oriental carpets covered most of the floors. Alabaster stands held priceless sculptured vases and figures, and copper and brass plates decorated the panels of the carved Lebanese cedar doors.

Esther went to the leaded windows to look out at a small garden and the sea, shimmering in the dawn light. A small

table held a bowl which the servant filled and Kurtsev smiled and thanked him in Greek with one of the few expressions he had learned from Sampson.

"I will return and prepare your breakfast in the morning," the servant said, smiling as he bowed slightly and left the young couple to their seclusion.

Esther turned shyly and went through the door into the garden. She followed a dirt path covered with grass and leaves that led down a slight slope to the inlet from the sea. There it widened and made a pool of clear seawater which was fed by springs that flowed over the moss-covered rocks. A few leaves floated on the surface of the secluded pool and the dense foliage that surrounded it gave it complete privacy. She stopped and looked up at her young husband and then down at the water. A look of devilment sparkled in her eyes.

"Do you remember our last swim together, Kurtsev?" she teased.

Kurtsev smiled at her words and reached for her. "There are no soldiers and dogs chasing us now."

She turned and lightly escaped his hand. "Yes, and now I am fully clothed, not like I was then—with you holding me."

He remembered how she had looked with the red mark across her breast and her hair floating in the water and Esther, seeing his face, laughed and she ran into his arms. She gave him a quick kiss, then deftly freed herself and stooped to kick off her sandals. She untied her braided belt with a single motion, loosened the dress strings about her neck and dropped the garment to the sand beneath her feet. Lightly and swiftly she ran toward the lagoon, tossing her underclothing along the way as she ran. She stood a moment at the poolside, abandoning all modesty, and dove neatly into the bluegreen water. At last she bounced up, her long black hair shining down her back. She was laughing.

Kurtsev stared in disbelief at the undergarments lying at the side of the path, and watched, mesmerized, as Esther's shapely body flashed white against the clear pool. His eyes darted about to make sure that they were indeed alone.

She bounced in the water, her sweet face laughing up at him, and her arm raised, beckoning him to come to her. He laughed and sat down to take off his shoes, then his shirt. He untied the

strings at the bottom of his trousers, and pulled off his leather stockings. The thought that Esther was his wife swelled within him as he made his way a little awkwardly over the sticks and small stones that scattered the path to the water.

"You'd better take off those baggy trousers or they'll sink you when they fill with water," Esther teased.

It would have taken an army to have removed Kurtsev's trousers at that moment. He waded in and Esther held her arms out toward him. He gasped slightly as water filled the cloth of his pants and he reached for her, excited by her firm white breasts and longing to return to the privacy of their rooms. He reached to grasp her arm, and she ducked under the water and was gone from his sight. He searched until he finally saw her glide through the water at the far side of the pool. He lunged, and with powerful strokes, soon gained the far side where he had seen her, but he searched in vain. She had disappeared again.

"Over here, husband," she called from the place he had just left. "I thought it would be hard to get away. Could it be that you are not the man I thought?" she teased again.

Kurtsev roared across the water like a walrus. This little girl was going to be a challenge to him all the days of their life, he thought a little grimly and yet with mounting excitement.

Esther laughed at his imitation, and feeling confident that she could outmaneuver him again made for the opposite shore with all her strength. In a final burst of speed, she surfaced into the arms of a grinning Kurtsev. She struck out playfully with her fists against his muscled chest.

Gently Kurtsev encircled her and brought his fighting bride into his arms. Her arms around his neck, she melted against his body, her lips lifted gently and her breath was warm against his mouth as she whispered, "Oh, my darling, my husband, Kurtsev."

Having waved his farewells to the newlyweds, Menasseh instructed his crew to sail into the Bay of the Golden Horn and drop anchor. Aaron ben Isaac was waiting alongside the cay, and Menasseh called out to him in greeting. Anna and the children all wore their finest clothes.

Sampson and Paul were dressed like traditional Greek

warriors and looked like the heroes from whom they were descended. Both guards stood looking fiercely across the waters at the city, thinking of their ancestors who had died in its defense. "For every Greek who died defending this city there was a ring of dead Turks around him," Sampson said.

"Only because it pleases Menasseh will I go ashore," Paul responded fiercely.

The two men were the last to be lowered into the boat waiting below. Despite their tension, they enjoyed Menasseh's excitement at seeing his friends.

"Can it really be a year since we were last here?" Menasseh asked.

"A year and more," replied ben Isaac. "Much has happened since then, but serious discussion can wait until later. Right now I wish to visit with Anna and the children who look beautiful as ever. And I must greet Sampson and his friend."

When the two Greeks had been welcomed by Aaron ben Isaac, who was the chief rabbi of Istanbul, he turned back to Menasseh.

"Word from your messenger spoke of a Russian and also of the daughter of Solomon ben Adhem. Are they not with you?"

Menasseh laughed. "They are in their love nest on the island of my father nearby. They were joined in marriage yesterday. We gave them a small boat as we neared the island. They will join us before the end of the week in time for the yearly Parade of the Sultan. Now tell me what has been happening; I sense there are serious problems."

"I had hoped to wait until later."

"Speak now, my friend."

"Very well, I will try not to overburden you, but there are many matters which require your attention, and we have so few days in which to accomplish anything—especially with all this celebrating going on. It is not easy to do business in such an atmosphere. I suggest we send your family to my country house. They can stay there while you and I share my city residence and conduct our business."

Bernardo and Fernando overheard and were delighted. Their father caught their look and smiled indulgently with only a faint note of warning in his eyes. He could not really expect

them to hide their enthusiasm at the prospect of riding horses again after an ocean voyage.

Menessah turned with satisfaction to look at the huge piles of merchandise waiting to be loaded aboard his ships. The thrill of trading across the world was a never-ending source of satisfaction to him; land or sea, the problems were but challenges for his intellect and energies. To become wealthy at something that gave one pleasure, he thought, was indeed a blessing. Not that money meant anything in and of itself, just that it made him more able to help those of his people who were in need. It was not inconceivable to be a rich Jew today and a refugee tomorrow when one's life was subject to the whim of rulers. His family had managed to survive; others had been less fortunate.

He thought of Esther's father who had been a prosperous and respected merchant—perhaps not in the category of the Rothschilds, but he had been building solidly. Suddenly he had lost his business and his life. The same could happen to him overnight. For the moment the sultan, who had gained huge profits from the Jewish community, was predisposed toward them. That did not negate the ever-present possibility of a change of heart. If that happened he would not hesitate to resort to torture, death and confiscation. It was a fine line they must always walk, one that disallowed any rivalry between the Jews and the Turks, for any threat to a Turk would bring instant retribution. But first and foremost, every Jew in Istanbul had to concentrate on keeping the sultan's treasure chests full.

"What is it that you need to tell me so urgently," Menasseh asked ben Isaac.

"You looked so happy dreaming, I did not have the heart to disturb you," his friend laughed. "Now we will have to wait until later."

He pointed at the rapidly approaching dock. Soon carriages were carrying them through Istanbul toward the gates of the great wall where guards in turbans topped with fur hats would question them about their business in the area. Despite their baggy trousers, the guards were warriors, and their muskets and scimitars were not to be lightly dismissed.

The carriages took their places in the line of traffic. The

children hung out of the windows to examine the wall which was seventy feet high and more than thirty feet thick. The drivers pulled the carriages over to the side of the road and stopped to make room for a twelve man patrol of Janissary soldiers to pass. They wore white peaked hats and crimson robes and strapped to their belts was a yataghan, a long, slightly curved knife about two and a half feet long with a handle and sheath made of silver and coral.

The children in the coaches were silent with awe at the magnificent precision of their beautifully decorated horses. Aaron ben Isaac explained about the soldiers in a quiet voice: "These are the elite guard of the sultan. Strange as it may seem, they were born Christians. When the Turks captured the Christian villages, they selected the most robust boys under fifteen and sent them to Asia for training. They were raised in the homes of Turkish peasants and taught the Moslem faith. They were well treated and, again, as strange as it seems, they became the most brutal toward captured Christians."

"It is also claimed that one Janissary is equal in battle to ten ordinary soldiers," Sampson said looking at Paul with a twinkle in his eyes. "But they would do well to equal one Greek."

The Janissaries continued down the road and the coaches again took to the street. Their route took them through the outskirts of the city, past the great hippodrome, the At Meydani where the horse and chariot races, and contests between gladiators and beasts were held. When the slender blue minarets of Sultan Ahmed's palace came into view, Menasseh's children, who had learned about the beautiful mosque, were once again struck silent.

It was late afternoon when they finally arrived at the rabbi's hilltop country home which had been erected by the great Basha, chief of the army under Sultan Suleiman, an uncle of Ahmed III, the present ruler of the great city. As the carriage came to a stop, Bernardo and Fernando leaped out, despite the protests of their mother and the laughter of their father, and ran straight to the rock walls that enclosed the paddocks where the horses were grazing.

Aaron ben Isaac followed the boys, explaining that he raised and trained these horses for the sultan and his court. "They are

the finest in the kingdom. You must not touch them, my sons. I will show you others that will give you pleasure. They will also provide you with a challenge, so do not despair." He chuckled at their disappointed faces and took them each by one hand to lead them away from dangerous temptation.

The rest of the family climbed the stairs to the main landing and Menasseh watched Sampson carry little William on his back. "Catch one for me, Bernardo, and I will join you for a gallop," the father shouted to his son before he pushed open two huge carved doors. Removing his shoes, Menasseh stepped into a large room and onto thick rich carpets.

Young girls came to take the children shyly by the hands to prepare them for their evening meal and Anna sighed with pleasure. "I can see that I will enjoy a rest here," she said, relaxing into a huge downfilled cushion on a low divan. Within minutes she was asleep and her husband was stealing away to join the rabbi and his sons.

On the fifth day of Kurtsev and Esther's honeymoon, a messenger arrived from Ivan Menshikov, the Russian ambassador to the court of Sultan Ahmed III. When Esther protested that they should stay one more day, Kurtsev replied that it was most urgent for him to present his report. The couple thus arrived in Istanbul the day before the sultan's annual parade. They had an escort of four well armed and obviously well trained Russian aides who so obviously looked upon Kurtsev as a hero that Esther's fears for her new husband's safety were allayed. Their attitude had pleased, but at the same time mystified Kurtsev, as they handed the couple into the small sailboat. He continued to puzzle over it.

The sail bellied in the breeze and the craft and passengers skimmed across the blue sparkling waters of the Marmaro Sea without the aid of the six sailors who sat well forward with raised oars.

Before he could answer his own questions, Kurtsev was handing Esther into an elaborately decorated carriage. Closely following them was their escort mounted upon four magnificent horses. When Kurtsev stepped into it, his weight tipped the well-sprung carriage precariously, making him grip the seat

to keep his balance, and causing the driver to cry out in alarm. But the carriage quickly leveled and the horses moved slowly into motion to take their place in the heavy traffic.

When at times they paused, and even occasionally stopped, Esther excitedly pointed out the sights that caught her attention. "Oh, Kurtsev, may I have some clothes like those ladies? Just look how beautiful they are. No, no, no—do not look!" She laughed confidently into his eyes. The women she saw wore full trousers, and over them, finely embroidered gauze smocks with high necks and long sleeves that fell back over the arms. On top of all this they wore close-fitting, ankle-length caftans, loosely belted, and over exceptionally soft socks they wore heelless slippers with upcurved toes, beautifully embossed and decorated. Their heads were covered with veils, draped to conceal all but their eyes.

Kurtsev looked indulgently over her shoulder, but he was more impressed with what the men wore on the street. He liked the look of their full trousers, shirts and dilmans, and thought the wide sash around their waists, into which they tucked their small necessities, a most practical idea. They, too, wore a caftan over all, and the wealthy were dressed in silk or silver, embossed and embroidered. Attached to the trousers were fine leather socks, over which they wore leather slippers, or boots. Others wore heavy yellow shoes topping their slippers. Their turbans, each a length of muslin, were wound around a felt cap. Those with responsible positions had beards which added a touch of dignity. He did notice that the men wore little jewelry other than rings, but the women were decorated with as much as possible—evidently a public sign of their husbands' affluence.

When Kurtsev and Esther had examined the people closely, they turned their attention to the bazaars along the streets. Most of them seemed to be selling food until they passed the Burnt Column. There they came upon the slave market, which was in progress. Esther's eyes saddened with remembrance as she saw the hopelessness in the faces of those in the lines, all waiting to be sold. She turned her tear-filled eyes away from the desperate look of a young boy who was about the age of her young brother, and she knew he would be better off dead than alive and being traded like so much horse meat. She turned

away, sickened, but not quickly enough to miss the sight of a man being beaten. Kurtsev saw too and lowered his head, covering Esther's face with his hand.

"He is no doubt being punished by an inspector of weights and measures for selling short weights. See the witnesses standing around watching the punishment?" one of their escorts said placidly.

The carriage moved to the other side of the city. The houses were of various sizes, but those belonging to the grand vizier and other officials and notables were palaces set in gardens along the shores of the Bosphorus. The courtyards were surrounded by high walls; sober and unornamented, with huge locked gates guarded by gatekeepers. Then the road narrowed. They drove up a gentle rise to pastures where boys attended small herds of sheep and drew up before the locked hammered-iron gates of Rabbi Aaron ben Isaac. By the time the watchman had opened the gates, servants appeared outside the mansion and the ben Yakov children were screaming a joyful welcome, with Menasseh and Anna close behind.

Rabbi ben Isaac came with open arms to enclose this daughter of his friend. "The children have given me glowing reports of Esther's grace and beauty and of your great strength, my son," he said. "I can see they did not exaggerate. Come into my home. Rest. Eat."

"My thanks to you, sir, and to you my friend Menasseh. I am but bringing Esther to you before I answer an urgent summons from the Russian ambassador. Escorting Esther here has already slowed my response. I shall join you soon, I hope." He stepped back into the carriage and this time the driver was prepared. Grinning, he leaned far to the opposite side to balance Kurtsev's weight on the step. The man raised his whip, the horses leaned into their harness leather, and the carriage moved swiftly and smoothly toward the open gates. Kurtsev leaned out of the window, but a cloud of dust soon hid him from Esther's anxious eyes.

Chapter Ten

The Russian ambassador, Ivan Menshekov, sat in a huge leather chair. His skinny elbows were on his polished desk and one hand was raised to his forehead as if to emphasize that he was in deep thought. Chair, desk and man occupied a huge room that was paneled in carved oak except for one end which sported a massive rock fireplace. On the hearth lay one Russian wolfhound; her mate was standing on guard at the door, his nose pointed toward the floor, his tail moving slowly, back and forth.

At one side of the heavily draped floor to ceiling windows, hung the Russian flag of Czar Peter and on the other the Turkish crescent.

Georgi Balin, Menshekov's secretary and first cousin, sat nervously at a small desk in a corner of the room. He looked up under his heavy dark eyebrows and thought that his cousin had an unrivaled capacity for concealing his real intention, for disarming his opponents by creating the impression that he was a simple old man. Hidden in the shadows Balin could allow himself a slight curl of his lip as he thought cynically that these qualities were what made of him an ambassador.

The impression of an old man being buffeted by fate and uncertain how to proceed, was a calculated technique by a self-possessed and determined man who had the wiles of an old monkey. He was mean, treacherous, rapacious, and while he could be agreeable when he wished, he was capable of great vindictiveness. He was justifiably loathed by those who must work under his aegis, and Georgi himself was more like a slave to the old man than a cousin. He had been away from his family in Voronezh for more than a year now. He had accepted this assignment as secretary because he was promised a leave every six months; even then he never would have accepted the position except for his duty to the ambassador—a duty resulting from Ivan Menshekov's discovery that Balin had borrowed state funds. Georgi's mouth curled in distaste at the never-ending obligation. It seemed that nothing but old age or accident would remove his bondage.

"If Kurtsev Bolinski returns to Russia and meets with Czar Peter, it means an end to our efforts to acquire his lands," the ambassador said musingly.

"He has married the Jewish girl, and I understand that he is going with the ship to Holland," Georgi replied.

"Has it entered your stupid head just why he is going to Holland and not to Moscow to lead his dead father's troops?" The ambassador showed his contempt for his cousin. Someday I must rid myself of him, he thought. He is no credit to Russia—nor to myself as a diplomat.

"He is going to Holland to be with his Jewish friends and his young bride," Georgi answered. He walked to the door and opened it. One of the great hounds crowded past him to run down the passageway. When Georgi gave a high piercing whistle, the dog slid to a stop and came racing back, to slobber over Georgi's hand with his big lolling tongue. The secretary closed the door.

They are two alike, the fool and his dogs, and both brainless, the ambassador thought. Aloud he announced, "No, fool! He is going to Holland to stop food and supplies from going to Charles of Sweden. That could be a deciding factor in the war. Winter is near and without supplies, Charles is not only stopped, he is beaten."

"To which we should raise our glasses!" Georgi went to the

ornate liquor closet and poured drinks. He raised his own glass. "To our support of Kurtsev Bolinski." He gave the smile of one who had clarified a difficult problem.

Ivan Menshekov stared coldly at his cousin. "You're a fool, Georgi. Let King Charles have Moscow for now. He is our family's chance to become the ruling house of Russia. With Czar Peter out of the way, the Menshekov family will dominate all, and perhaps I will be the natural selection as ruler." He rose and began to pace the floor, deep in thought.

Georgi watched him, a thin twisted smile on his bearded face. So this was what Ivan had been working for! Why the man could not even run the ambassador's office adequately—and to think he aspired to the Russian empire! He broke in on Ivan's thoughts. "You don't want Bolinski to go back to Russia, and you don't want him in Holland. What do you want of him? He will be here shortly."

Ivan stopped directly in front of Georgi. His eyes had the fire of a fanatic and his thin-taloned fingers reached out and stabbed at Georgi who backed up a few steps to stand against the wall.

Georgi tried to smile. It took every ounce of his control not to brush the stabbing finger away. His eyes were caught by Menshekov's inexorable stare and he could not look away until Ivan's eyes turned toward the door, then out toward the window.

"I can expose you at any time I wish, and the Czar will have you tortured and killed. It wouldn't take long for you to tell everything," said the ambassador coldly.

Georgi's face was ashen. What his cousin said was true and the reason for his own compliance with Ivan's demands.

"Remember, one word of what I have said, and you know the consequences to yourself. I want Kurtsev Bolinski dead. You are going to arrange it, and I will tell you how you are going to do it."

He released his hold on Georgi and turned back toward his desk. The secretary raised a hand in silent protest. He had no love for the big red-headed Russian, but he shrank from the thought of killing anyone. If he was required to obey, and he must, there were surely ways to kill a man without doing it personally. "I can arrange to have him poisoned. That is sure

and does not involve us," he said tentatively, turning back to pick up the drink he had not yet touched.

"No. Bolinski is a well-known person and an intimate of the rich merchants of the city. If he was poisoned in the sultan's city, it would cause an investigation. It would reflect on Islam hospitality and on food that is sent to us from the sultan's own stores. No, our heads would indeed roll for bringing dishonor to the name of Ahmed, the shadow of God, and the ruler of millions."

The ambassador clasped his hands behind his back as he walked from the window. "The man Bolinski has arrived," he said briskly. "You must stay and keep your ears open and your mouth shut. I will do the talking."

He went to his desk and sat in his high-backed chair. He straightened items on his desk, smoothed the broad sash around his waist and adjusted the embroidered wide cuffs of his silk shirt. When he was in the presence of the sultan and his court, or on the open street, he wore a turban, but here in his office, his bald head reflected the light from the windows and the torches set into sconces on the walls.

Menshekov picked up his quill pen and began to write on the heavily embossed paper before him and he did not look up immediately when the door opened. He finished the sentence and then gave a smile as he raised his head.

Kurtsev had sat in his carriage, relaxed and optimistic. He was not pleased to leave Esther so soon after their marriage, but this was a summons he could hardly ignore. When he passed through the gates of the palace courtyard, his carriage was joined by an escort of six of the sultan's elite Janissary guards. They sat on their horses with the ease of men born to the saddle and held their turbaned heads high with the pride of their office. They passed alongside a procession of camels, bringing arms and provisions of food to the palace; another brought taxes gathered for the imperial coffers. In the outer courtyard a body hung suspended by the arms between two small columns. Once through the middle gate he found himself in a space reserved for the strangulation or stabbing of condemned prisoners. Four executioners whose tongues had been removed stood stationed there, ready to carry out the

orders. Other courtyards were surrounded by hunting and sports grounds. There was a maze of mosques, schools, hospitals, libraries, barracks, baths and fountains, as well as kitchen gardens and public and private apartments whose light, airy pavilions provided panoramic views of the Bosphorus and caught the summer breezes that floated from its shores.

Kurtsev could not help but be impressed by the time the coach came to a stop at the ambassador's quarters on the periphery of the sultan's vast facilities. The Janissaries turned slightly to watch the red-haired Russian step out of the carriage and enter the marble-floored courtyard. He followed his Russian guide down the interior passageway, awed by the ever-present beauty of the decorations and art that casually filled each available inch of wall space. He found it strange that such dignity and luxury would stand side by side with the hustle and bustle of shops, commerce and stables in the sultan's city within a city.

"The palace kitchens employ a thousand cooks and scullery workers who cook for nearly ten thousand people a day," the guide volunteered, grinning at Kurtsev's disbelieving astonishment as they climbed a flight of stairs to the upper level leading at last, to a decorative arch into the ambassador's waiting room.

A secretary eyed them coldly before he disappeared into Georgi Balin's private office. Balin dismissed the guide with a flick of his fingers and went forward with outstretched arms to warmly welcome Kurtsev. After an embrace, he introduced himself and led the young man into the private office where the two wolfhounds sniffed languidly at his boots.

Georgi bowed his head to his cousin, the ambassador. "Your honor, sir, may I present Kurtsev Bolinski, who was kind enough to leave his bride of but a few days to answer your invitation." Turning to Kurtsev, he said, "And this is our country's ambassador to Sultan Ahmed, personally appointed by Czar Peter. The family of Ivan Menshekov has, as you know, done great service to the czars of Russia."

The ambassador rose from his chair and came around the huge desk. With a smile he grasped Kurtsev's hands in his own. Kurtsev, alerted by a coldness in the older man's eyes, looked away. "Come, come, my son, sit down and be comfortable.

Georgi, place a chair closer to me for our guest. Kurtsev—I hope you do not mind that I use your given name—I am an old man and I take the privileges that come with the years. I have difficulty hearing, and I would like to have you close so that we may talk softly. We must guard against listening ears.” He looked toward the doors as if to make certain there were no eavesdroppers.

Kurtsev listened with an enormous sense of disappointment, unhappy that his country was being represented by an old man. As if reading his thoughts, Menshekov said, “I dislike the responsibility of being an ambassador at my age, but all our other, and perhaps better, qualified men are at Czar Peter’s side in Moscow.”

Kurtsev felt momentarily embarrassed, as if he were being subtly criticized for not being in Russia himself. The ambassador raised his hand and continued. “I know how much you must wish to be at the Czar’s side, my son, but the circumstances which brought you here were beyond your control. Now that you have chosen to go to Holland with the Jew, Menasseh ben Yakov, you will fight on a different front. Still I wish there were more men like yourself and your noble father in our homeland.

“My grief knew no bounds when I heard of his death and the infamy of Count Dolgorsky. A shadow has been cast over your great name. I know the rumors are without foundation; yet they persist. If there is any way I can help clear the Bolinskis and see that your lands are returned to you, tell me and it shall be done.”

As Menshekov talked, Kurtsev’s eye was drawn to a charm that hung from a gold chain around the old man’s neck, a silver filigree amulet hung with a cowrie shell, a wolf’s tooth, and a shriveled chestnut. The ambassador saw his look. “No, my son, I have not turned *Turk*. This charm against the evil eye is a present from Sultan Ahmed III.” He leaned closer to Kurtsev. “When the sultan gives a gift, he expects—and gets—things of far greater value in return. His treasure house is beyond conception, and increasing daily.” He paused to fondle the amulet. “Moslems fear the evil eye. They say it empties palaces and fills graveyards. It is well for all of us to follow the customs while we are guests in their country. So I wear this charm—to please the sultan.”

Kurtsev nodded. "I can understand and agree with that, sir."

"But enough of this nonsense, my boy. As a friend and countryman, I wish to know of your plans."

Georgi had kept quietly in the background, but now he came forward. "Sir, it is time for your appearance at the court."

Ivan turned to him with anger, as if only the presence of Kurtsev prevented him from chastising his cousin for the interruption. Then, apparently changing his mind, he said softly, "Georgi is right, Kurtsev. I am obliged to leave for a short time. Many of my days are filled with summonses to the court and most of that time is spent in the outer halls, waiting for some special announcement. Today the sultan's mother has taken a purge and everyone has been summoned to gather and offer prayers. The court will remain in session until the announcement is made that all is well. Georgi will see that you have refreshment."

The three of them rose and went to the waiting room where Georgi gave the order for food, relaxed in a chair and invited Kurtsev to visit the liquor cabinet if he so desired.

"We keep a small amount of wine and Russian whiskey on hand, but we do it with the utmost discretion; it is forbidden by the sultan for anyone in his country to use alcoholic beverages. Offenders are severely punished, and our office would not give us much protection if we were caught drunk." Georgi would have liked to continue this discussion, but Kurtsev had other questions that needed answering.

"The amulet that the ambassador wore, what did it contain?"

"A verse from the Koran. Some amulets contain the ninety-nine names of God; others have names of saints, magic squares or secret combinations of numbers. The Moslems have many charms for many different purposes. You may have noticed that all buildings are inscribed *Ya Allah*, *Ya Hafiz*, Oh, God, Oh Protector. The building would not be considered safe without that inscription."

Kurtsev was curious about Russia and the ambassador and Georgi. "Your name is Balin. Isn't that associated with the Menshekov family?"

"Yes, I mentioned that we are first cousins."

"Have you been in the service of Russia long?"

"I was in the Office of Finance. When Ivan was asked to be Russia's ambassador to the sultan, he requested that I serve with him here. I used to be in the central office at Voronezh, and I have seen your home in the country several times. I am aware of your great military accomplishments, and I have even seen you perform in sports events many times. It has been over a year since I was home—" He sighed.

Both men thought of home and wondered bleakly if they would see Russia again. It was as if the old life was gone forever; sometimes it was even as if it had never existed at all. Georgi looked down at his fingers; the nails were chewed down to the quick—and he had done that before meeting this giant redhead of whom he was ordered to dispose. The man before him was all the things he himself would like to be, in looks and strength. He was a man of honor—Georgi's hand trembled. Was he base enough to destroy so vibrant a man? Depraved enough to retreat so easily from dishonesty to murder?

Kurtsev broke into his thoughts. "Tell me of your family?"

"I have a wife and two daughters, eight and ten. My father was killed in battle, and my mother now lives with her family. She was a Menshekov."

"You say your father was killed in battle?"

"Yes." He would not be proud of me, Georgi thought. It is better he does not know his son is unfit to be a warrior, and lacks the ability to become an officer. "There was not much wealth in my father's family, but my mother's influence secured me a position in the treasury."

"In the event of Czar Peter's death and the exile of his family, it is possible that a successor could be called from the Menshekov family, is that not so?" Kurtsev asked thoughtfully.

Georgi was slightly uncomfortable at this turn in the conversation. "I really haven't given that much—thought."

"Because of his seniority in the family and his experience, would not the ambassador be the most likely to be selected?"

Georgi gave a grunt of contempt, but recovered himself quickly. "I am sure my cousin would agree with that assumption," he observed with a skeptical smile.

There was no more time for conversation. The big dogs rose and moved away from the door as it was briskly thrown open as the ambassador entered, followed by a servant with a tray of bread, cheese and fruits. Kurtsev noticed no alarm in the dogs' attitudes, but there was no welcoming wag to their tails either.

"The sultan's mother has passed her crisis, and the court has resumed its duties," the ambassador announced affably. Georgi went around to a corner of the room, helping him off with his coat and then ordered the dogs back to their places on the cold hearth. The servant exited quietly.

"Well, what has been the content of your conversation?" Menshekov whispered to his cousin, his voice deliberately casual despite his inner anxiety. He had been reluctant to leave; Georgi's weak mind and loose tongue were a dangerous combination.

"Kurtsev asked about your charm. I explained about the evil eye, and local charms and superstitions."

Kurtsev seemed concerned with the food on his plate, and the ambassador's anxiety lessened.

"Now, Kurtsev," Menshekov addressed the young man, "we were discussing plans for your future, but before we proceed, I must tell you that the court was buzzing with the news that the great bear killer is in the city. I was pressed for information about you. Everyone asked if you were here for the sultan's sports. This is the month of Ramadan, and tomorrow is the start of the greatest occasion of the year. There will be daily parades, sporting events and nightly entertainments. Even the curfew will be lifted. I tried to stifle the rumors of your participation, but I'm afraid I was not too effective. Some asked why you are not with the fighting men in Moscow, but it seems to be general knowledge that you are going to Holland with your bride."

Kurtsev, alarmed, set aside his plate of food. How, he wondered, could anyone know or care about his plans unless the ambassador—

Suddenly Kurtsev felt anxious to be out this company, away from the ambassador's oppressive office. "I am surprised that my plans interest anyone but myself. However, I shall be leaving shortly, and that will end the speculation of idle tongues."

"It is not quite as simple as you believe, my friend. Otherwise I would not have summoned you here."

Kurtsev raised his eyebrow.

"Or I should say invited you here," Menshekov continued smoothly, "on a matter of extreme importance. I recently concluded an unprecedented deal with the sultan—an agreement to trade Russian wheat for Turkish cloth. He has never before allowed the export of cloth; he wants it all for his people. I have convinced him that our soldiers will soon have to face winter and may not survive without his help."

The ambassador had Kurtsev's full attention.

"Part of the wheat will be from your father's vast stores, the wheat that was to have been sold to the Jew, Solomon ben Adhem. That grain can now be used to assure Russia's triumph."

Georgi was wide-eyed at this disclosure. He had not heard of it before.

Kurtsev felt doubtful and the subtle criticism about the sale of wheat to a Jew didn't help. "The sale of wheat to Solomon ben Adhem was in accord with an export agreement approved by the Czar's ministers. I am sure that you must be aware of that."

The ambassador could not miss Kurtsev's tone of defiance. "Of course, my boy. I am familiar with the agreement, and it would have been acceptable under ordinary circumstances. But the war has gone badly for us, and that has changed matters somewhat. Hear me out. In order for me to make the exchange," he paused and drew a breath before he continued, "I need you. You must take the wheat from your father's storehouses. The harvesting has been completed, under the Czar's direction, and the wheat is ready to be loaded on the Jew's barges which have been brought back to Voronezh. Once they have been loaded, you will sail into the Golden Horn and deliver the cargo to the sultan's storehouses. Your Jewish friend Menasseh ben Yakov will be asked to use his caravan to transport the cloth to Moscow." The ambassador sat back smiling, confident that he had conveyed his loyalty and friendship to Kurtsev and his family and made clear his unusually charitable attitude toward the Jews.

Kurtsev considered the ambassador's proposition. His nega-

tive feelings were apparent as he fingered his lower lip and frowned. When his brow seemed to clear, Ivan Menshekoy thought jubilantly that he had taken the bait.

Kurtsev spoke seriously. "There is a bounty on my head in Russia. I will surely be pursued by my enemies."

"It would have been better, true, to kill Count Dolgorsky outright, instead of blinding him. His soldiers have all been placed under another command. They are with Czar Peter defending Moscow. To my knowledge, no one is looking for you any longer. I will be happy to send messengers ahead of you to notify the authorities of your commission for the state. They will give you the assistance you need. The way will be cleared for you to bring us the harvest."

"Surely there are others who have not the suspicion of treason on their heads."

"I need a man of strength and courage, one I can trust, one who knows the business of exporting wheat—and one who has sufficient wheat for the trade. You have enough influence in the district to obtain grain for all our needs. I also need a man who carries influence with the caravans. There is no other man with both qualifications. As for why you should do it—this is your one chance to prove your loyalty to Czar Peter."

"My father and I often stood shoulder to shoulder in battle to serve our country. My father left his home to fight for Russia when he could have stayed and served himself better. The night we both left for Moscow, barbarians killed our family and burned our home, and in the process branded the Bolinskis traitors." Kurtsev rose and stood over the desk, his face and body rigid with the strength of his passions.

The ambassador paled with excitement, and a sheen of sweat glistened on his face as a faint smile played on his lips. The dogs felt the tension and stood alertly, crowding against the door.

"Damn those who question my loyalty. I'll go. The czar will know of the strength of my arm in his cause. I am ready!"

If only I could find such strength and loyalty to me, thought the ambassador. "Sit down, my son. There is more. There is a condition to this agreement, one of which I was not aware until a few moments ago." He took a deep breath. "There is considerable opposition to this deal among the sultan's court members. The grand master of artillery, the chief overseer,

and the imam were all outspoken in their opposition. The one thing these people have in common is their love for the games. The strongest men from all the countries that the sultan rules have gathered here, men from Rumelia, and Anatolia, Greeks from Asia Minor, Albanians, and the great fighters of Armenia. Also the devil worshippers, the Yezidis."

The ambassador pointed his finger at Kurtsev. "Russia is not represented. We are not, of course, a part of the sultan's empire, but we have been given an official invitation for one participant. The fulfillment of our agreement seems to rest upon our enthusiasm and support of their annual—celebration. My boy, I am hopeful that you will represent our country in the sultan's games. The choice is yours, of course."

It all sounded odd to Kurtsev but he thought that perhaps, given some time, he could understand the reasoning. He did find the thought of competing stimulating, though, and smiled. "I will do as you ask," he said slowly. "I will enjoy the few days of competition before leaving with my wife and her—our—friends."

The ambassador returned Kurtsev's smile. "Will you not go to Russia to make the trade, my son? I must know, for there are many things to prepare before you depart for Voronezh. I must send my messengers with dispatches, Russian escorts must be arranged to accompany you to Azov, and Turkish guards from that point on. I have arranged for an apartment for you to use while you are here and for my guards to work out with you so that you will be fit for the games. It will mean great honor for Russia if you win a share of the awards."

"I will not want the apartment. I will stay with my wife while I am here," Kurtsev answered.

The ambassador hid his displeasure. He was used to having his plans carried out to the letter, but it was possible that these would fail if he pushed too hard. Perhaps Kurtsev's independence could be used to advantage. "We can easily meet during the day to make our plans," he said calmly, reversing himself. "You do appear to be in condition for the games and staying with your friends will give you a chance to talk to your friend, Menasseh ben Yakov, for we will certainly need his help. But a word of caution, my boy, all this must be for his ears alone. Remember, there are those in this city who would love to see

our plans fail. They would prefer a weakened Russia as a neighbor."

He stood up and held out his hand. "My carriage will return you to your bride. I have another court appearance in the morning, so I will expect you after the noonday prayers. I am glad you are willing to assist us in this matter. It will be of help to you, too, my friend." He turned to his cousin. "Georgi, accompany this young man to the carriage—and take those hounds with you. They need exercise. But do not be long; there is work for us both to do."

Kurtsev ran swiftly down the steps, the hounds leaping along before him. He noticed that the shops were closed and decided that the ten thousand who made up palace populace were presumably at their evening meal. As he stepped into the carriage, the Russian mounted guards fell into line behind it and they were soon making their way to the home of Aaron ben Isaac.

Chapter Eleven

There were more than a thousand Jewish families in Istanbul. By the look of things, all of them had gathered at Aaron ben Isaac's estate. Young people rowed gaily decked caiques on the freshwater stream, Kathane, which was also known as the sweet waters of Asia; others sat on the fringes of the woods and garden enjoying the late autumn sun. Kurtsev entered the house by the main door. He was anxious to find his Esther and share his experiences with her. Not knowing where to look, he followed the unique sound of Tessa's violin to the ballroom. A large group of people sat listening to her, among them Menasseh who spotted Kurtsev and quietly made his way to the young man's side. He affectionately put his arm on Kurtsev's arm, led him into a private library and closed the door.

"I must tell you of my visit with the Russian ambassador, Menasseh. I do believe all my troubles are over. But first, where is Esther?"

"Someone has gone to fetch her from the river. While we wait for her, there is much I must tell you."

"I should go to meet her."

"No. Listen first. While you were gone I was called to the sultan's palace to attend Ahmed's young son. Your Russian ambassador was there. He began talking loudly, and I listened because your name was not only mentioned, but caused considerable commotion. He said you had come to the city for the sole purpose of challenging Hassan, the strongest man in the Turkish Empire. His great grandfather was the first man over the wall at the siege of Constantinople. Kurtsev, Hassan is a giant of a man and has never been defeated. He no longer wrestles just for the sport of it. He's a professional. He wrestles for money and prestige and the stakes are always very high. There are no rules in his contests and they don't end before his opponent is dead or permanently crippled. Your ambassador said you were backed by our wealth, and that you have no fear of Hassan, whom you called an old man, well past his prime, adding that it was time he was disposed of—by you." He searched Kurtsev's eyes, for such a braggart's attitude did not seem in character for his young friend.

Kurtsev's whole mien sobered. "I said no such things," he said grimly.

"Then he made those statements to rouse the antagonism of the Turkish people against you—and us too, for he made certain it was thought we supported you in this. The Turkish people are sensitive about their national heroes. Hassan is part of the Turkish tradition. He is expected to retire, gracefully, not to be held up to ridicule."

Kurtsev walked to the heavily draped windows and parted them. Daylight was fading and torches had been lit on the caïques which moved up and down the stream like fireflies. Menasseh stood quietly, waiting for an explanation from Kurtsev who had turned away from the window and stood with his feet apart, leaning against the tall fireplace mantle. The young Russian repeated everything, careful to include the nuances. "He expects me to solicit your help, Menasseh," he said finally. "I did not understand why he felt such a challenge would be of service, but I did agree to participate in the games—and to get the wheat for the sultan—and, yes, to accompany your caravan back to Russia with the cloth."

Kurtsev looked at the older man, expecting counsel.

"Let me think about this for now. We must join the others.

Esther is undoubtedly anxiously waiting for you out in the hall."

Kurtsev strode toward the door, but Menasseh barred his way. "One more word, Kurtsev, before you go. For the time being, at least, it is best that we say nothing of this to anyone. I will make inquiries and we will talk again before you meet with the ambassador."

Esther's kiss was not just a welcoming one, but more, much more. Kurtsev felt his heart respond as he enclosed her in his arms. He pulled her close to his side and she had to take two steps to his one as they moved toward the garden, whispering of having missed one another greatly. Hand in hand, they wandered over to a raised platform where a magician was pulling live pigeons from his sleeve to the wildly screaming delight of the children. Esther drew Kurtsev to a long table of food and drink.

"Are you hungry?"

His eyes gleamed wickedly and he reached for her, but she squealed and darted out of reach.

"Mmmm, yes, my little one, for you—but here?"

She grinned and helped him load his plate from the platters of sliced beef and lamb, roast chickens, fish, breads, cheeses and greens. There were flavored and sweetened waters of every color and kind, cakes and sorbets, cheeses and yogurts in great mounds set in beautiful floral patterns so that the food would delight the eye as well as the palate. They sat to eat where they could watch and hear a group of singers and dancers from Spain, castanets clicking as they told of the age-old arts of love with stamping feet and fluid grace.

Then, leaving their plates for the servants to gather, the couple went to where tumblers were performing gymnastic feats such as they had not thought possible and where trained monkeys and puppets entertained groups of children who seemed infinitely delighted, particularly by the puppets whose little stage had seven tassels hanging over its middle, announcing the performers to be the most skilled at their craft. The two traditional characters, Hajeval and Kurayaz, were as popular in the palace as in the cafes. They were fifteen inches tall, colorfully painted and oiled for translucence.

Tessa who had found her way to Esther's lap said: "They are

made of camel skin. Kurayaz is a cunning man of the streets, and Hajeval has much book-learning, but he gives himself airs. Everyone here loves their jokes. Papa says they are joined together with wax thread at the neck and arms, the waist and knees. Esther, he says he will let me take lessons so that I may work the rods that control their movements."

Esther leaned over to smooth the child's long hair from her face, and Kurtsev watched her gentleness. He rose and took Tessa by the hand saying, "I am sure that your mother will be looking for you. It is time for bed, little one."

Tessa nodded and responded to Esther's good-night kiss with one of her own on the lightly tanned cheek. When the child had gone, Kurtsev reached for Esther's hands and drew her from the grass into the circle of his arms. "And I wish to put you to bed—with me," he whispered in her ear. She glanced around, her cheeks rosy with embarrassment, then throwing propriety to the wind she snuggled close to him and said, "Yes, my husband. Oh Kurtsev, I do love you so much."

When they lay at last content in the cool of the night, Esther said, her lips against his neck, "I am so happy and contented. Do not ever leave me, Kurt. Wherever you go, that is where I want to be—with you. My life is purposeless without you."

"Esther, my sweet—" but Kurtsev found he could not destroy the tranquility of the moment. He turned to draw her closer into his arms. He knew he must not take her back into the danger of Russia, yet he had a need to serve his czar. That had been his training from his youngest days.

"I did not remember what fun Istanbul could be at carnival time," Esther said, interrupting his thoughts. "Let's go shopping in the bazaar tomorrow. At night there is to be a celebration at the sultan's palace, and Rabbi ben Aaron has obtained places for us." He could feel her enthusiasm, and did not want to destroy it, still he had no choice but to explain to her the commitment he had made to the ambassador. Her soft even breathing told him she was nearing sleep.

"Sweetheart—"

"Mmmm? Good night, husband," she whispered slowly and lazily, one small hand caressing his cheek and her lips touching his bristled chin.

Let her sleep the sleep of her innocence tonight, Kurtsev

thought. Tomorrow will be time enough to tell her. He lay there and thought of the morrow with a vague sense of guilt that he knew excitement at the thought of meeting the great Hassan. Would the man be any more difficult than any of the others he had beaten? Esther stirred beside him, aware that his heart had quickened its beat. He looked down at her dark head in a shaft of moonlight, and wondered briefly if he desired her again. He almost turned her to him, but instead he held her to him with a sweet sense of pleasure until he, too, sank deeply into sleep. He slept until a servant opened the drapes. Breakfast was served on the small balcony outside their room, overlooking a sweep of green lawns that drifted down to the trees and the stream. Knowing he could no longer delay, Kurtsev faced Esther's disappointment and told her he could not spend the day with her. He had promised himself that he would also tell her of the championship games, but a glance at the sun told him he had not the time for full explanations. "Don't be upset, please, no matter what you hear while I'm away," he said, adding, "You will have fun today, my sweet, and I will see you tonight."

Esther, puzzled and hurt, tried to hold his hand to detain him.

"But Kurtsev, surely—"

With a quick kiss on the top of her head, he removed her hand and strode to the dressing room and rapidly began to clothe himself, his thoughts on Esther whose mouth had lost some of its sweetness. She looked no less beautiful that way, sitting there in her silk robe with her hair hanging loosely about her shoulders. He almost went back to discuss the whole thing with her. She was entitled to know. But Menasseh had advised him against saying anything and reason told him to wait.

He went to the window when he was ready to leave. "I won't be gone too long, and then we can go into the city if you wish, and also to the palace."

She watched him tearfully, examining the baggy trousers, tied at the waist and ankles, the loose shirt with long sleeves, the shoes that came up to his ankles and tied with leather thongs. He looked like a stranger—a red-headed, Turkish stranger. As she watched his futile attempts to fit a turban over his hair, she burst out laughing and he joined in gratefully.

"This is one custom I can do without," he said firmly, shocking a servant who had magically appeared to help him. Later in the kitchens, she was heard to comment negatively on "gentlemen who appear in public bareheaded."

Being bareheaded did not disturb Kurtsev, however. He descended the curved, tapestry-hung stairway, his hand on the heavy oak banister. A servant awaited him at the foot of the stairs to escort him to the library. Menasseh stepped forward to greet him, and Aaron ben Isaac rose from his deep leather chair and bade him welcome. He motioned Kurtsev to a chair beside him, and Menasseh to a seat nearby. There was a small table beside the rabbi and on it were sheaves of paper.

Menasseh spoke first.

"Kurtsev, I have taken the liberty of discussing everything with the rabbi because he has lived here in Istanbul all of his life, as did his people before him. In fact, his great grandfather was here when the Greeks held the city and Constantine lost it to the Turks. We Jews have been allowed relative freedom for several generations, for we have brought wealth to the city through our commerce. We are safe only as long as we have the sultan's support. The rabbi is close to the royal family, so much so that he is the only one allowed to attend them when they are ill. He is often called to advise the sultan on financial matters because he knows all of the dialects and languages of the provinces of the Turkish Empire. He is also a part of our Dutch East India Company."

"Enough. My head will get swollen," the rabbi smiled. "Kurtsev, Menasseh has told me you plan to take Esther to live in Amsterdam. I am pleased that you will be part of our company. Nevertheless, you should give some thought to living in Russia, perhaps even in Voronezh. We need a man to represent us in that country, now that Esther's father is no longer there." He smiled reassuringly at Kurtsev, who felt a passing annoyance that Menasseh had so freely discussed that about which he had asked his friend to remain silent.

"Two heads to counsel you are better than one, my son," Menasseh said, reading Kurtsev's doubts. "I felt that we needed sound advice for a variety of reasons, least of which is our conviction that your death is being planned."

Kurtsev, stunned, looked at Menasseh in disbelief.

"Yes, Kurtsev, you heard me correctly. We are confident that you are being manipulated in such a way that you will appear responsible for your own death."

There was silence in the room as Kurtsev was given a chance to review all that had been said and done to bring him to this moment in time. He stared at the toes of his shoes and at the richly patterned Persian rug beneath them, but he only saw images of the ambassador and Georgi Balin. It was true that he had sensed a coldness behind Menshekov's affability. It was also obvious that the cousin held the old man in contempt; he worked for him and was treated like a servant.

At last Menasseh's deep voice penetrated Kurtsev's thoughts. "Let us tell you what we have found. First, the ambassador has men already loading the barges with your wheat. Ownership of your father's land is being contested in the courts by two families, the ambassador's being one. The wheat is being shipped to Azov which is being held by the Russians because of a special treaty with Turkey. Most important of all, Kurtsev, there is absolutely no firm agreement between the sultan and the ambassador on an exchange of wheat for cloth! It has been lightly spoken of, but there is no agreement. And another thing, my boy—since your czar is in desperate need of wheat as well as cloth, why is the Russian ambassador taking the wheat in the opposite direction from Moscow? Consider the reason, Kurtsev!"

Both of the older men watched the young man study the question.

"I am sure that your assessment of Czar Peter's needs is accurate," he said, after a while. "It makes sense. Obviously the ambassador does not have the czar's interest in mind."

The rabbi reached for some papers on the table beside him. He held them in his hands and said quietly, "My son, the survival of our people, the Jews, depends upon our knowing in detail all matters pertaining to the politics and commerce of the countries in which we do business. We pass this information on to each other. The accuracy of the information passed through this network can mean survival. As witnessed by Voronezh, a whole city population can be slaughtered overnight. Our messengers are always on the move. Many are sailors and soldiers, but there are also teachers, entertainers, servants,

and slaves, as well as physicians, professors, bankers and businessmen. All are part of a communications system which covers Europe and Asia. We even have people in some parts of the Atlantic and the Pacific. I will soon know, to the pound of food, and to the yard of cloth, what is required by Charles and the czar. In the same way I will learn what munitions are needed. I already know the number of men in each army, and of those men, how many are fit for combat. Kurtsev, I tell you now, that the army which receives the food is the army that will win. Without it there will be a stalemate until spring. Oh, food will be sent to King Charles—”

“No,” Kurtsev protested loudly and rose to his feet.

“But that can be controlled,” ben Isaac went on softly, as though he had not been interrupted. “That was why you were going to Holland, my boy, to divert supplies in—other directions. However,” he sat forward briskly, “if your wheat could reach Peter before winter sets in, he can win the war.”

“Why does our ambassador, who is the czar’s subject, want to divert the wheat from our troops in Moscow?” Kurtsev asked.

Before the rabbi could answer, there was a tap on the door and a servant entered with a tray of refreshments. “Your ambassador seeks the throne himself, as does the house of Dolgorsky,” the rabbi said, ignoring the cakes and drinks on the table.

“They are too old,” Kurtsev blurted out. “How could one of them be chosen, even if Peter died in defense of Moscow?”

“Menshekov’s family is from the royal house. A successor would be chosen from among the nobles and counts. Why Ivan Menshekov, you ask? I’ll give you the answer. There is a shortage of wheat throughout Russia. Ivan Menshekov has access to many thousands of tons which will soon land in Azov. He could virtually buy his way to becoming the ruler of Russia.”

Kurtsev’s mind reeled with the concept of such political manipulations. His gut reaction was to reject the thought of the ambassador’s plan, yet his mind told him the old man was capable of carrying out such a fantastic program. Paling at the thought of what it would mean to Russia to lose Peter and to be ruled by such an unprincipled traitor, he rose abruptly to his

feet. "I must leave immediately for Voronezh to stop that shipment and get it to Peter. Is that what you are saying to me?"

The two older men said nothing and, anxious for more of their expert advice and guidance, Kurtsev sat down again. After a few moments he said slowly, "There must be another way. The ambassador is the only one who could authorize any change of plans, and without his help I would almost immediately end up in chains, no good to anyone." He ran his fingers through his bright red hair. "Do either of you have some thoughts—perhaps even plans?" he questioned.

"There is another way," Menasseh said, "but it is dangerous. First you must get the confidence of this traitor. He must send out the dispatches he has promised, giving you full authority to handle the shipping of the wheat. You must have him give you a letter of authority to act in his name. His cousin, Georgi, should accompany you to give further credence to your purpose. The ambassador will do that much and he will also promise to send his cousin, because he thinks you will not leave this city alive."

The rabbi nodded his head in agreement with Menasseh.

"Now comes the dangerous part," Menasseh continued. "The ambassador cannot have any responsibility for your death, for the sultan would not hesitate to condemn him to death if he preempts the privileges of Islam or brings dishonor to the throne. Menshekov has already started the rumors that will culminate in a challenge to the death from Hassan, provided you can first prove your worthiness to meet him by wrestling with, and subduing, the champions from the provinces."

Kurtsev raised his hand to protest his willingness to meet the challengers, but he was interrupted by ben Isaac. "Make no mistake, my son, the ambassador will see that somewhere in the competition you will be killed. He can then carry out his plans to become the new czar of all Russia." He reached for the tray of cakes and held them out to the other two men. The drink he passed was honey-sweetened wine, illegal among the Moslems, but not for Jews. Raising his own glass he said, "We will drink to the success of Czar Peter in the defense of his country." Turning quietly to Kurtsev, he said, "We shall see

that all that the ambassador has promised you is well-known. When you win your matches, he will not be able to back away from his commitments to you."

At that moment the servant announced that a coach awaited to take Kurtsev Bolinski to his ambassador and the discussion came to an abrupt end.

Kurtsev's discussion with Ivan Menshekov was short and to the point. As the rabbi had predicted, the ambassador acceded to all of Kurtsev's demands. When the young man left, the ambassador sat back in his chair with a satisfied look on his placid face. As far as he was concerned, his conference with Kurtsev had been satisfactory. Georgi stepped forward to raise a question, but Menshekov held up his hand for silence. There was a commotion out in the courtyard and he looked out of the window to watch a sentenced prisoner being dragged toward the decapitating columns where the mute executioners waited. It was a common enough sight to him, and one in which he had little interest, but it sobered his mood and removed the pleasant look from his face.

"Yes, yes, I know the questions you have on your tongue," he said impatiently to Georgi. "I would prefer them to go by way of your brain, but since that is an impossibility, I will allow you to waggle your tongue. Speak up, man, have it out."

Georgi mopped his face and neck with his scarf. "You have given Kurtsev Bolinski a letter of authority to move the wheat, yet you have told me he must die!"

"You are an idiot, Georgi. I find it difficult to accept you as a blood relative. If Kurtsev survives the games, he can be of service to me in hauling the wheat, and he can much more easily meet with an accident in Russia than on Turkish soil."

"You said I would go with him. Is that really your intent?"

"Of course not," the ambassador said, shrugging his shoulders irritably. "You will go back to Voronezh when I go. Now take those hounds out for a walk. I have work to do."

When the doors closed behind Georgi and Ivan Menshekov was alone, he allowed himself to laugh. Finally, he wiped the tears from his eyes and gazed out of the window, his attention on the execution that was taking place. There was a morbid fascination in watching the head roll away and be caught and

placed between the victim's feet. He felt a chill and impatiently shrugged it away. He pulled a shawl up over his thin shoulders; his face muscles twitched and he clamped his jaw shut as he closed his eyes and contemplated his dark thoughts until his cousin returned.

"What reports do you have on the contest?"

"What contest?" Georgi asked.

"Which contest? You idiot! The one between Kurtsev and Hassan, of course." The ambassador struck his hand on the desk. "I asked you for a report." Georgi's one redeeming feature, he thought, was his ability to give accurate reports. Though the ambassador had many paid spies working within the palace and several on the outside laboring in shops and taverns, part of Georgi's job was to make the rounds to gather and organize their information. For that reason alone, keeping his cousin nearby was worthwhile, particularly during this time of religious observance when men relaxed their vigil and their tongues. He had better keep Georgi's loyalty, he thought, especially now. "Come, come, my boy," he said kindly. "We must plan well for our return home. That means we must have all the knowledge possible in order for our plans to culminate in success. I know of none better than you to assist me in this matter."

Georgi's face glowed with Menshekov's unaccustomed praise. "You have my complete loyalty, sir," he said. "I will do whatever is needed." Even, he thought, if it means getting rid of Kurtsev Bolinski!

Chapter Twelve

Each year when Menasseh's caravan stopped in Istanbul, Sampson, the Greek, spent time with his old friend and countryman Demetrius Zaimis. It was usually a joyous reunion, full of hope and dreams, but this time Demetrius's news filled Sampson with grief.

"You have become a free man too late, my friend," Demetrius said, guiding him by the shoulders as they walked along the seashore.

"When?" Sampson asked, knowing without having to hear the words that Demetrius spoke of his wife.

"Some months ago."

Sampson did not ask how she died. At that moment it did not matter, nor did it lessen his grief to know that she had been dead for a while. He would need his own time to cure his sorrow. He could not share it with anyone, not even his children who were grown and married and had scattered. Somehow he had expected them to remain as they had been eight years ago, when he was taken captive and enslaved. But nothing stayed the same! He should have known that. His years of slavery had been bitter and harsh until he was purchased by

Menasseh in the slave market at Alexandria. When he learned that he could earn the price of his purchase with service to the ben Yakov family, he had begun, for the first time, to dream of a reunion with his family.

"From slave to what?" he asked bitterly.

Demetrius said nothing, knowing his friend must deal with his grief in his own way. He allowed the sound of the surf and the screeching of the gulls to take the place of words, and when he broke the silence it was to say, "There will always be a place for you here in our Greek community, my friend."

After a lengthy silence, Demetrius said, "I have received word that your Russian friend Kurtsev has challenged the great Hassan to do battle."

Sampson's attention focused away from his sorrow and he stopped walking. "I cannot believe that he would do this. He would surely *accept* a challenge from any man, but to challenge Hassan—"

"I have heard the news from many different sources, including the palace and the Russian ambassador."

"I must find Kurtsev. If you are right, he will need me. There are those who would not deal honestly with him."

"Sampson, I cannot think your friend stands a chance against Hassan. He has never been beaten in all the Sultan's empire."

"In a fair match, Kurtsev can win."

"Men from all over the world have matched their strength and skills against Hassan. They have gone down in defeat, dead or broken and crippled for life. He is a professional and the idol of the Janissaries; they will stop at nothing to ensure a victory over a Russian."

"Then—if Kurtsev has enemies he cannot see, he needs me all the more," Sampson said grimly.

"Hassan claims his ancestors killed the Greeks to take this city. Many of us would be well pleased by his defeat."

The two men retraced their footsteps in the sand, walking rapidly back toward Demetrius's home. Now that the month of Ramadan was ending and there were only a few days of feasting, dancing and sports left, the new curfews and restrictions had been lifted and work was suspended so that everyone could celebrate and enjoy the last of the festivities.

Demetrius spoke at last as they moved along. "One of my

nephews works in the parks and has an important task in the Parade of the Sultan. He leads the untamed lion. It is a huge ferocious beast brought in from the plains of Egypt." Demetrius panted, a little out of breath from trying to match Sampson's stride. "'How can you control him,' I asked. 'Only to my uncle would I tell the secret,' my nephew answered. 'I carry fresh gazelle meat, powdered with opium. Whenever the lion begins to look nervous I give him another chuck of meat—'"

"I see what you're leading up to, Demetrius," Sampson said.

"Opium does not cause cramps or death, but it would slow your Russian down enough so that death at the hands of Hassan would be inevitable—"

Paul was waiting for them at the house of Zaimis. When he was informed of Kurtsev's challenge he rose to his full six-foot-four-inch height and doubled his fists saying, "No one can get to Kurtsev with Sampson and me on guard." He looked at his friend as if they could share their thoughts the way they had shared their battles. Paul had no family and had never married. His parents had been killed by a Serb attack on their village. Sampson was the only family he had. They rarely disagreed on philosophical or practical matters, and this time their accord created matching anger which did not bode well for Hassan.

"There will be much money wagered on any fight against Hassan. The odds will be heavy in his favor," Demetrius said with a tight smile.

"You would do well to put your money on Kurtsev, my friend. He will win!" Paul said abruptly.

"Don't vent your temper on me, my friend," Zaimis chuckled. "You know the Russian's abilities. I have seen Hassan in action, and I have never seen him beaten, but I assure you it would give me inordinate pleasure to see it happen."

"You will," Sampson and Paul said in unison. "You will!"

Menasseh's older sons were given permission by their father to enter the city for the wrestling matches. There were preliminaries, of course, but the main attraction would be the contest between their friend Kurtsev and Hassan, the Turkish

giant. They went to the hippodrome early to find good seats, walking rapidly beside the land walls that stretched from sea to sea. They reached the outermost limits of the bazaar at dawn, just as the muezzins throughout the city called the faithful to prayers from high in the minarets. All activity stopped and the two boys, not wanting to look conspicuous in the crowd, joined the others in kneeling to face Mecca until the chanting stopped.

Suddenly the ground began to shake with the beating of hoofs and a company of Saracens raced past the parade grounds. As the last soldier went by, Fernando grabbed his brother's sleeve and whispered, "There must be more than a thousand of them, Bernie!"

"And did you ever see so many good horses?" Bernardo said, wide-eyed.

Prayers over, the boys made their way down the street, following the direction of the mounted soldiers. For as far as they could see down the street, on both sides, were sherbet merchants, their shops overflowing with thousands of china cups and bowls of china filled with varieties of the dessert such as the boys had never dreamed existed. Rhubarb and rose vied with lemon, lotus and tamarind against orange and grape—all begging to be tasted. It was too much for either of the boys to resist.

"One piastre each," the shopkeeper said when they had made their selection. They placed their coins in his palm. Since they were not dressed in the usual clothing he eyed them suspiciously. They looked foreign to him and, suspicious of all strangers, he looked closely at the money before he shrugged and put the coins into his pocket. Only then did he disappear behind the counter to get them their ices which they ate as they rejoined the crowds.

Some people were walking, others were riding; many were simply standing, fascinated, watching caged animals being taken to the arena for the games—lions, tigers, and bears who would face humans in mortal combat. The boys, entranced despite the sobering thought of man against beast, watched until the sound of music drew them to a pretty cafe. It was too early for food to be served, but tables and chairs stood in readiness around a gaily decorated stage where a young girl

danced in silken trousers which did little to hide her shapely thighs. The veil beneath her eyes did not fully conceal her mouth, and when she saw the boys she danced toward them and parted her lips in a sensuous smile. Though it was but a rehearsal, her graceful movements brought forth the musicians' best efforts, and her dance became steadily more provocative. The music matched her mood and a crowd soon gathered, but she seemed to be whirling for the boys alone. When she came to a stop, it was directly before them. She sank to the floor with a sinuous and fluid motion which caused them to turn scarlet. She then removed her veil, puffed up her cheeks and rolled her eyes. The audience laughed and applauded as she ran to the back of the stage. As the dancer disappeared behind the curtain, she waved a beckoning finger at Fernando and Bernardo, who turned and ran to the accompaniment of raucous and somewhat envious laughter from the males in the audience.

The boys did not stop running until they reached the main street. Even when they slowed to a walk neither said a word for a while. Each was thinking his own thoughts. Bernardo had grown up with his mother and sisters, but at sixteen, the sight of a voluptuous young girl twisting and turning her bare belly, her eyes speaking to him and her smile inviting him, provided him with a multitude of strange new feelings. His body was urging him to go back to the girl. He glanced at his fifteen-year-old brother, realizing the younger boy was probably experiencing some of the same sensations he was. His brother was, by nature, more analytical than he and was likely examining why the dancer looked different to him than his sisters; it could hardly be only the trace of color on her eyes and lips that made her appeal so different than theirs. Perhaps the roundness of her breasts and hips and her tiny squirming waist—

"We had better hurry," Bernardo muttered, trying to distract himself from his thoughts. His success in doing so was in large measure due to a kiosk they happened to be passing at that moment. They joined the crowd watching ice being unloaded from boats, and Bernardo, speaking in his native tongue to a man who was obviously Greek, asked, "Where does the ice come from? I wonder how it gets here in this heat, so close to the desert."

"There are always over three hundred boatmen on excursions to the mountains Katirli, Mudanga, and Olympus," the stranger answered, taken by the boys' youthful curiosity. "The snow and ice and cold water are for the sultan's kitchens, the grand vizier and a few other powerful men." He moved aside and motioned them to do the same as the carts carrying the ice moved ponderously across their path.

"We've seen a lot with our father in his travels, but we have not before seen the likes of this place," Fernando said, when they at last arrived at the hippodrome, an oblong flat which covered more than twelve acres. He stared at the Egyptian obelisk in the center, and at the rows of gigantic figures surrounding the emperor's throne. There was a giant maiden who held in her hand a life-sized horse and rider and, dwarfing that, a bronze Hercules so huge that even a man of Kurtsev's stature would not reach much beyond the kneecaps. Joining the other sightseers, the boys gawked at the sultan's enraged elephant, gaped at the eight sphinxes, howled at a she-wolf and peered at a monument from which a former traitor had been hanged, head down, by an angry populace. Were it not for the pressure of the crowd the boys might have dallied there forever.

"I wish we could stay here for a while, Bernie. There is too much to see in one day," Fernando complained.

"If I lived here, I would enter the horse races," his brother said, adding with youthful bravado, "And I would go back to see that dancing girl!"

Fernando laughed and pulled a face, but before he could say anything the caretakers began to move all unauthorized persons from the arena so they could prepare for the activities scheduled to commence after the noon prayers. The two boys could not see all that was going on because of the dense crowd of men and boys, but they noticed that a special section was being reserved for persons of importance. Men crowded around the betting tables and the boys listened to snatches of conversation, gathering information. Skillful wrestlers gained victory without breaking their opponents' bones, because they knew winning wrestlers in the preliminary bouts would be fined if their opponents were injured. Kurtsev's battle with Hassan

would, however, be a fight to the death. Most of the betting was, naturally, in favor of Hassan.

In the sultan's palace Aga Orhan of the Tanners Guild, waited for his private audience with the sultan. It shocked him to be afforded time on the day of the hunt, a day when over two thousand courtiers tried to get the sultan's attention. The summons to Ahmed's presence had come when Orhan was with the master of the horse and he had no choice but to leave his shooting companion and obey the summons. He found the sultan eating dinner. He was dressed in scarlet and gold brocade embroidered with diamonds. The empress was so heavily loaded with jewels that she could hardly move, but they ate with elaborate ritual nonetheless. The food was passed through twenty-four hands before it reached the imperial table which was set on the smoothly cut grass in the courtyard of the palace. Only the wine was served directly to the sultan by a courtier kneeling on one knee.

Orhan's audience with the sultan was brief. When it was over he backed from the table and returned thoughtfully to his hunting partner to continue setting their falcons at a seemingly inexhaustable supply of herons—but his mind was no longer on the hunt. He was pleased when the day came to an end, and he could meet with the officers of his guild and pass on the sultan's orders: "The red-haired Russian, Kurtsev Bolinski, must not fight Hassan. I do not want him harmed."

Hassan was to win by default; all bets were to be paid.

Orhan was not really surprised by the sultan's command. Hassan was getting too old for a competitor like Kurtsev; he had once been the greatest wrestler of all time, but his last fights had either been against inferior opponents or against challengers who had been doped. Hassan, who was an honest fighter, had no knowledge of the deception practiced by those who wanted him to remain Istanbul's hero, nor did he know of the sultan's order to Orhan. As for Orhan, he controlled seven hundred tanneries and over three thousand men. His workers went bare footed. Their hands and feet were colored a deep red, with arms and nails so blue they were almost black. They dressed in aprons, turbans and dolmans of variegated leather and though many of them were criminals, the

guild gave him full control over their lives. They were a wild bunch who lent him a heady sense of power—as long as neither they nor the sultan knew he had been dipping into guild funds. Another aga had lost his head for the same dishonesty and these men were just as capable of wreaking their vengeance on him. If not, the sultan would move swiftly to see him beheaded for fiscal dishonesty. Now, with the ruler having ordered the guild to make sure that Kurtsev forfeited the fight, Orhan could make a bundle of relatively honest money by betting on Hassan. His winnings would repay the “loan” and his head would feel more securely joined to his shoulders.

He happily repeated the sultan’s orders, smug in the knowledge that Kurtsev Bolinski could hardly avoid the surveillance of three thousand men.

Ambassador Ivan Menshekov was agitated—not that this was an unusual state for him. Now, however, his annoyance had increased in proportion to the acid content of his stomach, which was worse than it had ever been. As for his aide, Georgi Balin, he stayed at his small desk with the dogs close by and wished he could become invisible and avoid the discord that was surely about to break out.

The ambassador gave Georgi a look of contempt as his eyes flicked over his cousin’s obesity and was reminded of the breakfast he had missed. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking through his window at the courtyard where teams of animals pulled loads of garbage. Sourly he recalled his first audience with the sultan over a year ago. He had come bearing gifts from the Russian czar to his friendly neighbor. Russia and Turkey shared a common boundary and it made sense to encourage such a friendship. By sheer chance the English ambassador had arrived at the same time, and they waited together in the sultan’s outer hall. It had angered him then that the grand vizier introduced the ambassador of Queen Anne first, particularly since the Englishman’s gifts far outstripped the czar’s. The sultan, seated on the royal divan and surrounded by his staff and elite guards, examined the gifts which the Englishman declared were estimated at a value of more than three hundred thousand piastres: a golden bracelet

with a floral design centered with a diamond even larger than the one set in the sultan's turban, an emerald-hilted dagger and sword, twenty beautiful slave girls, and a finely caparisoned horse whose trappings were worth 70 purses of silver. By the time the ambassador from Russia was introduced, he felt thoroughly miserable and embarrassed, a situation which was not remedied by subsequent gifts from Ahmed to the British. More important, the Englishman had been invited into Istanbul's wealthiest and most influential homes, and had been assigned an apartment near the sultan's personal quarters, while he—Ivan examined the garbage wagons and the execution columns and felt ill and angry.

He turned his wrath toward Georgi.

"What have you done to locate the man Kurtsev?"

Georgi pulled himself hastily from his chair and headed for the outer office, saying, "I will see if there are any late reports."

"We will take any reports right here. Your trips to take information end up among the slave girls in the servant quarters. Your actions are an unpleasant reflection on the honor and dignity of Russia." He spat, then continued. "If our plans go wrong, you will be the one to pay, my dear cousin. With all of your spies, you cannot find one huge red-headed man. I have given the sultan my personal assurance that the man Kurtsev will lose, and while I am convinced he does not stand a chance of winning, I must think of what my position will be if by some stroke of chance or luck he does. It is only a few hours until the game, and this event has become the biggest of the day."

Georgi looked up with a flaring of impudence. "Why did you start the whole thing if you were worried about the outcome?"

"How was I to know that the sultan and his court would bet so heavily—and that the Greeks and the Jews would move to cover all bets? I'm told money is pouring into the city. The odds are a hundred-to-one against the Russian, but if he should win, the Sultan will lose a fortune. And the guilds. And—"

"I have done all that I can. There is opium in the food Bolinski will eat. There is a sedative in the honeyed water that will be by his side."

"The contenders rub their skins—"

"That, too, has been taken care of. His oil contains an additive that will cause severe irritation and blisters. Any cuts or breaks in his skin will absorb the poison."

"That is all very well, but what if he does not eat the food or drink the water? If you do not even know where he is, you can hardly be sure of anything."

Georgi mopped his face and neck with his kerchief. "We think he is with his Greek friends in the caves their shepherders live in."

The ambassador said nothing more. He sat in his chair and cracked his knuckles until a soft tap on the door announced the coach that was to take them to the hippodrome where the great arena had been cleared for the games to shortly begin.

Six postillions of Janissaries, parading and trumpeting before the sultan, announced Hassan who stepped from his kiosk with his two attendants and prostrated himself before his ruler. He remained in that position on the crimson velvet rug until Ahmed, with a flick of his wrist, gave him leave to stand. Hassan stood and turned to face the spectators and the roar that went up from the throats of the cheering crowd echoed in the farthest reaches of the city. In Herculean splendor, his shaven bronze head thrown back and his oil-covered body reflecting the late rays of sunlight and casting deep shadows in his mighty rippling muscles, Hassan the wrestler of Istanbul exulted in the adulation of the crowd.

The trumpets sounded one more time and the crowd grew still. As Hassan and his attendants moved down the steps to the raised platform where the battle was to take place a new sound was heard. There was no sign of the red-headed Russian bear killer. The crowd was murmuring, low and ominously and Esther gripped Anna's hand.

Anna returned the pressure, hoping the young woman would take it as reassurance that all was well. She knew, as did Esther, that it was incomprehensible that Kurtsev would not meet his challenger unless something dreadful had happened to him and she wished with all her heart that they had never come to Istanbul. Perspiration broke out on her forehead and she dabbed at it with a small lace handkerchief. Suddenly the murmur of the throng became a chant and someone shouted

angrily and rose to shake a fist in the air. Esther felt Anna's grip tighten on her hand and she craned her neck to see the two men who were approaching the sultan's platform. It was Sampson and Paul—without Kurtsev. She felt a rising panic when they turned from the royal area and went, instead, to the platform where Hassan waited. They reached the wrestler just as a tall man stepped from the group of workers who had cleaned the arena and strode toward them.

The man threw off a soiled caftan and removed a dirty turban from his head.

"It's Kurtsev, Anna! His head has been shaved and his face and head are dark, but he walks like Kurtsev." Impulsively she rose and shouted his name. "Kurtsev!—Kurtsev." Her voice carried over the heads of the crowd who took it from her and repeated it over and over again until its sound filled the vast arena.

Menasseh leaned close to Esther, his words meant for her ears alone. "We decided Kurtsev would never reach the contest alive unless he came disguised. I can assure you he is well and rested, my child, and at his best to meet his adversary. He had neither heart nor stomach for this match until we convinced him that the ambassador to Russia was a traitor. That and the fact that so many of our people, both Greeks and Jews, have wagered much money on him, have given him the determination he needs to win. He also knows that if he dies his wheat will not go to the czar, but to the sultan's warehouses. He will not lose!"

Hassan and Kurtsev stepped upon the platform and stood in opposite corners on the tamped earth. Sideboards held the earth in place on the raised platform but there were no rails to confine the fighters or obscure the sultan's view.

The two combatants warily sized each other up. They were of similar height, but Hassan was heavier and older and had gathered much experience during a life of soldiering and fighting in all parts of the Ottoman Empire. Kurtsev, on the other hand, had the strength and stamina of youth and the advantage of knowing Hassan's fighting methods. For two days he had listened to first-hand accounts of Hassan's methods of fighting.

"He uses his head like a war club."

"He kicks backward like a mule."

"He can break bones by stomping on your feet. If you are down, he will jump on your arms and legs, breaking the bones in those, too."

"He gouges the eyes, tears ears off with his teeth and can bite off a finger with a snap like a dog."

"He can sit astride a horse and break its ribs with his legs—twist and break the neck of a bull—"

Kurtsev, looking at his adversary, felt a twist in his belly. It would go when he actually began to fight. There was no referee and no rules except one—the victor must have his adversary upon the platform before he could be crowned. He glanced up at the sultan who raised his holy sword over his head. At least he was not alone. He had done battle many times at his father's side. This time Menasseh and Anna and Sampson and Paul were figuratively at his side. And Esther. Sweet little Esther who was somewhere in the stands praying for him. He resisted the urge to seek her out with his eyes.

"Kurtsev, watch out!"

The battle had begun.

Sampson had shouted just in time. Kurtsev dodged the downward swing of Hassan's fist and concentrated on only one thing—his opponent's oiled movements.

They circled warily. Suddenly Hassan struck out with his foot to kick the Russian in the groin, but Kurtsev was able to turn and take the kick on his thigh. He felt a paralyzing pain that made a reality of his opponent's tremendous strength. As the Turk charged with his hands outthrust, Kurtsev remembered Sampson saying, "He will try for an early victory, for his wind and stamina are no longer that of a young man." He grabbed the huge arm with both hands, ducked, and gave it a twist and a jerk. As he pulled, he felt a muscle tear. He held on as he had hung on to the great bear and Hassan rolled with him to the dirt floor, lashing out with both legs. Catching Kurtsev in the chest, he knocked him away and onto his back. While Kurtsev was gasping for breath, Hassan scrambled to his feet and rushed forward.

A great cheer went up from a thousand eager throats, but somehow, dimly, Kurtsev heard the voices of Sampson and Paul.

“Roll—roll—roll, Kurtsev!”

Impotently, Kurtsev gasped for breath. Hassan sprang into the air, and with a growl of victory, doubled his legs and came crashing down. Kurtsev managed to roll, but not far enough. The platform shook as the Turk, missing Kurtsev with his body, but not his leg, hit the dirt. The limb alone felt like the entire weight of an oak tree and Kurtsev could not move.

Hassan swung his weight over on to the Russian and began to pound his doubled fist into the younger man's face and neck. When he thought victory was within his grasp, he smiled and pointed his thumbs at Kurtsev's eyes, but the Russian held his breath back. The blow in his neck would have been fatal if it had struck his windpipe, but his own whipcord muscles saved him. He arched his back and, despite his three hundred-pound burden, raised Hassan high enough to get leverage. Easing up a little, he slid backward, just enough to swing a leg and lock it around Hassan's head. Then, keeping his hold, he rolled over. He knew this move would not win the contest, but he had taken away the older man's advantage.

When he realized Hassan was using the time to rest, the Russian let go and jumped to his feet. Hassan rolled to his knees and Kurtsev struck him on the side of his face with his bent knee, a movement that would have broken the neck of an average man. The Turk merely rolled with the punch and came to his feet, his eyes fierce, and his teeth showing in a wolfish grin of pleasure at facing so worthy an opponent. He began to rush forward. It wasn't until he tried to raise his arms that he realized the right one, the one Kurtsev had twisted, was not responding as it should have done. He had not noticed any particular pain, but there was a numbness he did not remember ever feeling before.

He looked at Kurtsev with new respect, saying with surprising gentleness, “Ah, Russian, your hands are strong, but mine are stronger!” The words were barely said before he hurled himself forward.

The Russian stood his ground. They grappled with each other for holds until, without warning, Hassan dropped as though clubbed. He hit the floor, rolled on his back and lashed his legs forward in one dancelike movement. Kurtsev was hit before he could realize what had happened. The blow lifted

him off his feet. Off balance, he hit the floor once again and before he could regain his feet, Hassan had hold of his ankle and was twisting.

"Ho, Russian, now you will feel the strength of a Turk's hands."

Hassan's laugh came from somewhere deep in his belly. He did not yet know how much the strength of his right hand had been affected by the torn muscle of his arm, but Kurtsev knew it was no longer destructive. Instinctively Hassan switched his hold to his left hand and took a foothold on Kurtsev, intending to twist the limb out of the joint.

Kurtsev rolled with the pressure until he was able to kick out with his left leg. He caught the Turk on the crook of his injured arm. This time Hassan felt the pain; his hold relaxed, and Kurtsev was free. He stood, walked, and having restored the circulation of his foot, was again ready to meet the giant's renewed charge.

This time Hassan came rushing in with closed fists pounding. Kurtsev used his arms to protect his face, still each blow felt like a sledgehammer, and he knew he could not stand up under that kind of beating for long. Falling into Hassan's trap, the Russian took a step backwards. The Turk, having deliberately maneuvered the less experienced man into a vulnerable position, grabbed the belt around Kurtsev's middle and pulled him off balance. He would have raised him above his head, but his right arm had lost its ability to counter the left and he lost his balance.

Both men fell to the floor and Kurtsev, taking immediate advantage, shot his arm around his opponent's bull neck and applied a choke hold. Hassan's neck muscles tensed but his windpipe, like Kurtsev's, was buried in layers of large muscles. Kurtsev managed to roll him over and threw a leg about his body, but the Turk managed to use his elbows to swing back and batter the younger man's ribs. With his free hand, Kurtsev held on to Hassan's jaw and pulled his head to one side. It took all of his strength, but he succeeded in loosening the headlock and his fingers were, at last, buried in Hassan's windpipe.

"Turk, you cannot free me from your back, and your elbows can no longer get at me. Are you ready to die?" Kurtsev asked, his face buried in the Turk's neck.

Hassan tried to reach his opponent's face with his fists, but he could only hit the top of Kurtsev's head. He knew his strength was going and felt the fight go out of his spirit. The Turk's breath was cut off and Kurtsev, feeling the signs of death, released his hold and staggered to his feet. He had no need to kill Hassan; all he needed to do was survive. In less than an hour he had subdued the invincible Hassan and that was enough.

Sampson and Paul, jubilant, threw Kurtsev's caftan over his shoulders and led him toward the sultan who rose from his divan, his displeasure highly visible. Reluctantly he handed a heavily engraved medal to his grand vizier who, in turn, presented it to Kurtsev.

The Russian, turning to leave, paused to look at Hassan's lonely figure. As the Turk struggled to his feet, their eyes met and the wrestler raised his good hand in salute.

Kurtsev, smiling, returned the salute.

Chapter Thirteen

No more than an hour after Hassan's defeat, Ambassador Ivan Menshekov was summoned to the court of the sultan where the grand vizier awaited him.

There were no formalities of greeting.

"How do you expect to cover the sultan's losses, Russian?"

The question came as no surprise to the ambassador who had known he would be called to account. "I have many sacks of wheat for the sultan's warehouses. How much of a loss did he suffer?"

"Over two million piastres."

"I will have enough wheat to cover that amount."

"The sultan expected to double his money, not just to get it back." The vizier was carefully studying this evasive man.

"I will bring enough to meet his demands."

"How soon?"

"Even now the barges are being loaded, and they will be floated down the Don River to Azov, where they will be loaded onto ships and sailed to the Golden Horn for the sultan's stores."

"How soon?" the vizier again asked.

"Not more than one month."

"There were other losses among our people. Perhaps some extra wheat would be considered favorably among them. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, your honor."

"Will Czar Peter be able to hold out against Charles?"

"Yes, your honor."

The vizier noted the doubt in the ambassador's evasive look. "One month, then. And the sultan has recommended that you shall be our guest—under guard, of course—until you can meet this commitment through your staff. I will send my servants to see that you are made comfortable."

The ambassador was escorted back to his apartment. He was perspiring, an unusual experience for him, but under the circumstances he was not surprised. He stood at his window, his hands behind his back in the familiar stance. His dream, his plans of becoming czar, were dashed now. At best he could hope for his life. Now he was in the hands of Kurtsev, his cousin Georgi, and two Greeks. Could he expect them to follow his orders? "They must!" he exclaimed aloud. His escort looked at him strangely, but Menshekov offered no explanations. He thought again of the orders he must give. Surely they would be obeyed. Suddenly he blanched as the truth of what he must write struck him. In his mind he saw the words as though in flame:

"I, Ivan Menshekov, ambassador to Turkey from Russia, hereby authorize the bearer, Kurtsev Bolinski, to handle, negotiate, and transport any and all available wheat according to his instructions and judgment."

Pale, he staggered and would have fallen except for the arm of the vizier's guard. "You had best be in bed, old man. You look as though you are not well," he said accompanying the Russian to the door of his bedchamber.

Menshekov sank wearily onto the side of his bed, removing the Turkish turban and letting it fall to the floor. He pulled open his silken caftan, and as he did so, his hand came against the amulet containing a verse of the Koran, and hung with a wolf's tooth and a shriveled chestnut.

"Hah! A protection against the evil eye?"

He jerked the amulet from his neck and threw it from him as hard as he could. It bounced against the wall and clattered on Georgi's small desk. The dogs gave him a look of pure dislike and moved to the far corner of the room while he stood, with shoulders bowed and stared sightlessly at his hands. Undoubtedly Kurtsev—with Georgi's help, of course—would take the wheat to Moscow, he thought, which made him a dead man.

While the Russian ambassador sat contemplating his chances for survival, the cause of his problems was reveling in the praise being showered upon him as a result of his defeat of Hassan. Kurtsev had agreed to go with Sampson and Paul to visit the home village of their Greek friends. As the result of his victory, many bets had been paid off at high odds and lavish food and drink was thrust upon him at every turn. Wherever he and the Greeks went, work ceased for the day and his appearance was cause for celebration.

They had been away from Istanbul for three days when Sampson observed a change in Kurtsev's mood. "Only until dark, Kurtsev, and then Paul and I will take you back to your marriage bed," he promised, laughing a little too loudly as a result of the constant raising of the wine cup to his lips. Slapping Kurtsev's shoulder, he pushed him on through the crowd of admirers.

An hour after sundown, Kurtsev, Sampson and Paul were escorted by several young Greeks toward the estate where Menasseh and his family were staying. The mood in Istanbul was not joyous as it had been in the Greek village and the young people moved quietly to avoid any unnecessary encounter with those who were still bitter about their heavy betting losses. They knew the elite Janissaries could readily be stirred to revenge, and the aga, though a stern disciplinarian, could not be everywhere to keep the peace.

Sure enough, they had not walked far before they heard the sounds of running horses. Paul, who was in the lead, raised his hand, and Sampson took Kurtsev by the arm into the soft fall grasses and up into the high brush to hide him from the pale glow of the moon's light. Meanwhile, Paul stood on a slight rise in the road and signaled as though to the approaching riders.

The Janissaries brought their powerful horses to a sliding stop. These were the most highly trained soldiers in the sultan's armies, and there were at least two patrols each consisting of six men. They sat easily in their saddles, their horses charged with energy but obedient to the slightest tightening of the reins in the hands of their riders. It was obvious that they had been drinking, which was contrary to the sultan's law. They were dressed casually, obviously in the spirit of the carnival. Several of the men had set their tall white hats at a rakish angle and the collars of their crimson coats were unbuttoned at the throat.

Circling the lone Greek, they demanded to know why they had been stopped. The dust from their horses rose from the ground and filled the air. Moonlight glinted on scimitar blades and on backslung bows and arrows as the captain came forward.

"Greek dog, was your signal for us, or were you giving a warning?" he rasped, waving his scimitar over Paul's head.

"I was abandoned by the roadside by my friends, sir. I seek but a ride to my village." Paul sounded drunk and he staggered convincingly, wanting no encounter with the well-armed and belligerent mounted soldiers.

The captain was in an ugly mood. "Drunkard! You are an offense against our sultan. Your soul will be tormented in the fires of eternity. Be off with you, Greek, we are after bigger game than you and we have no time to be giving rides to the likes of you. We seek Kurtsev—the fighter of old men—for we would match him with our swords to avenge Hassan."

"Is there among you one who would face the Russian Kurtsev in fair fight?" Paul asked drunkenly, ostensibly astonished that anyone would try to match the skill of the incomparable Kurtsev.

"Watch your tongue, Greek. One of us is worth ten ordinary men," the captain said arrogantly.

The men were getting restless and the horses reflected their mood, stamping and snorting until one soldier shouted, "Let us leave and search the man out. A few fires and some dead Greeks will flush him out. Kurtsev, the Jew lover, will choke on his own blood before this night is over—"

"First," a second rider interrupted, "throw this Greek a

sword. My blade thirsts for Greek blood. I will give this one a chance for his life." There was loud laughter at the suggestion that the fellow had a chance against such a formidable foe. The men dismounted and surrounded Paul. One of them threw a scimitar into the dust at his feet. The captain, poised with legs spread apart and sword ready, ordered the horses to be led off the path and tied. As for Paul, he felt no fear. He was well-schooled in the art of fighting, and though he was no longer a young man, he never shied away from a fight. His heritage as a Greek was at stake, and he raised his weapon to accept the charge of his opponent in the name of all the Greeks who had died during the siege of Constantinople, now called Istanbul.

Before he could strike a blow, a deep voice sounded from the dark outer edge of the group. "Hold on, Paul. It is not Greek blood the captain really wants, it is Russian. While I do not doubt your ability, my friend, I must be the one to cross blades with the captain and give him the satisfaction he seeks in the dark of the night."

Kurtsev elbowed his way through the circle of soldiers who had turned as one at the sound of his voice.

Many swords were drawn, but the voice of Sampson was heard above the rattle of blades against scabbards. "You are surrounded by men with loaded muskets. We will not hesitate to kill. Sheathe your weapons and you will have a fair fight."

The captain, enraged at the suggestion of cowardice, said, "Sir, we will not surrender our weapons. To call us cowards implies that you do not know our word is our bond. I, therefore, give you my word that if this Kurtsev defeats me, my men will return to their garrison without further harassment. However, upon my victory over him, my men will wish for satisfaction from you who hold weapons against us, thirsting for our lives. And now, Kurtsev, fighter of old men, I am anxious to spill Russian blood upon our Turkish soil."

Once again Kurtsev put all thought of Esther from his mind. Both his wife and his plans to start immediately for Voronezh would have to await the settlement of this issue. In the moonlight, the captain appeared to be a powerful man of about his own age, several inches shorter than he, but a man of

formidable reputation. Like the other Janissaries, his loyalty to the sultan was absolute. His rank meant he was a veteran.

The captain removed his spurs and laid aside his pistol; he handed his tall white hat and crimson coat to one of his men. In his blue silk shirt, with the tails hanging loose over his velvet trousers that were tied at the ankles, and with the sharp, curved blade of his scimitar held in readiness, he took a graceful stance.

Kurtsev's blade was of equal length, but only had a slight curve. He had made a leather wrapping for the hilt to enlarge it to fit his hand. He wore soft velvet tied at the ankles and a light shirt of cream silk which he removed. A murmur went up from the soldiers who had only seen Kurtsev from a distance. The captain, seeing the muscle development which had not been obvious at a distance, felt his first doubt. He rushed forward and, with moonlight flickering on the blade as it flashed down, he sideswiped with his huge curved scimitar. Kurtsev easily sidestepped the blow and countered with a thrust of his own that left a thin red welt across the captain's cheek and he realized the Russian was not the awkward hulk he'd anticipated. In complete silence the soldiers, cold sober and no longer cheering, watched as the combatants each sought an advantage. They stirred up the dust in small puffs and the sound of steel against steel was the only sound that jarred the stillness of the Turkish night.

Sampson and Paul and their Greek friends lowered their weapons and, moving with the action, mingled with the soldiers. They had every confidence in Kurtsev, but even they could not anticipate how quickly it would be over. With an agile movement Kurtsev maneuvered his opponent against a tree, grasped his wrist and the captain's sword dropped to the ground. He grabbed the officer's belt with his other hand, released his wrist and catching his shoulder, raised the smaller man above his head. It was the same hold he had used on the barbarian Neshi. That time he had broken the man's back but instead of bringing the captain down on his knee as he had done with the Bashkir, he placed him on his feet and stepped back. Saluting, he said, "Captain, I have never met a better fighter and I wish you no harm. I must leave for Russia on

imperative business for the czar, so I will wish you well and depart. Perhaps we will meet again and then, in fairness, you will kill me."

The light of battle in the captain's eyes dimmed. He still had his pride and he was alive; for the moment he could ask no more.

Lights were still burning when Kurtsev and his friends arrived in Istanbul. Esther ran into her husband's arms, asking with widened eyes about the few dried drops of blood on his hands. Kurtsev, laughing, lifted her from her feet and swung her around. "A slight delay, sweet, but I am well as you can see." They all walked into the big house and he drew Esther up the curve of the huge stairs. He raised his hand in a brief goodnight gesture, then swooped the girl at his side up into his arms and strode up the treads two and three at a time. He carried her into their sala and kicked the door shut with his heel, then sank down into a big sofa chair with his bride in his lap.

"Menasseh has told me you must return to Russia," Esther said, her arms around his neck and her face pressed against his cheek. "Please take me with you. I cannot bear to be apart from you for so long."

Kurtsev shook his head. "There are many things I must do before we can be together again. Menasseh leaves for Amsterdam tomorrow. I will see you on your way with him, and I will come to you in the springtime. There is no other choice, little one. I could not do the job I must do if you were with me—I would be too concerned for your safety."

They murmured of the future and eventually her tears dried against his chest. He held her hand in his and studied the lovely fingers, the well-kept nails brushed with polish. It was going to be hard to leave her, he thought. He breathed a deep sigh of resignation as his thoughts returned to the long road ahead of him. He wanted Esther beside him in his own home; he wanted a family. That was surely more important than the czar of Russia. It was time to nurture and be nurtured.

"Your sons will be proud of you, Kurtsev," Esther said.

He started to say he had changed his mind, but instead he

picked her up and carried her to their bed and they made love until dawn.

The caravan that would take Menasseh's train overland to another great seaport was ready for departure shortly after Kurtsev and Esther fell asleep. Before the sun rose Sampson and Paul were giving instructions to Menasseh's sons. The Greek guards would themselves be going with Kurtsev and the boys must take over certain responsibilities.

"I suppose that you two youngsters had a good time in Istanbul and would prefer not to leave it so soon," Sampson teased.

"Oh, the sights to be seen in that city! But I would rather get out on the road. There will be another day for Istanbul, and just think of all the cities we have yet to see," the younger boy responded.

"Well, I'd have liked another few days there. I found it most interesting," Bernardo said, with a knowing look that Sampson could hardly miss.

"You went back to that girl at the cafe!" his brother accused. "You'd be lying if you deny it."

"You'd best be wary of girls at carnival time, boy. The trouble they could cause you would be nothing compared to what your father would do to you if he heard of it," Sampson said dryly.

Both boys sobered at the mention of their father, whose teachings were constant. An hour later Menasseh and Rabbi ben Isaac emerged from the big mansion, laughing and joking. Behind them, hand in hand and walking more slowly, were Kurtsev and Esther, followed by Anna and the children.

Menasseh and his wife climbed into their wagon. Kurtsev lifted the children into the next one and turned to hold Esther close once more before he set her in the vehicle beside them.

Bernardo rode up beside his father's wagon and said proudly, "Father, we are ready to roll."

Menasseh raised his arm in a signal to move, and gave a last salute to the Russian. "I will take care of her until you come, Kurtsev. Success in your endeavors."

Kurtsev watched them move out of sight, the muscles at the side of his jaw working to keep his emotion from showing.

Helplessly he thought that there went the very worth and meaning of his life. At last, knowing the sooner he got down to work, the sooner he could return to Esther, he made his way to his horse and men.

Around midnight, a small craft moved through the Dardanelles and into the dark waters of the Black Sea. It carried Kurtsev and the two Greeks. Also aboard was a packet of letters from the Russian ambassador. The letters were in the possession of one Georgi Balin. They included the authorization demanded by Kurtsev in exchange for victory.

Kurtsev, feeling the bruises, stiffness and soreness from his battle with Hassan, came out of the cabin below to breathe deeply of the clean fresh air of the sea. He looked up at the crescent moon, the symbol of the Moslems, which hung over the horizon and went aft to watch the helmsman. There was a man seated against the railing he did not remember seeing before, but who raised a hand in greeting as the Russian approached.

Rising to his feet, the man threw off his enveloping cape.

"Ho, Russian," he said loudly, whipping out his long curved yataghan and raising it high above his head so that the light of the crescent moon reflected on its polished steel. "I owe you my life, and here am I to pay my debt." Hassan laughed, grinning wolfishly as his blade disappeared into the folds of his robe.

Kurtsev grinned back and put his hand on the shoulder of his recent antagonist. "Come. You have a place by my side—though it may not always be an easy one." They went below and Kurtsev gave him a bunk—his own. "Sleep well, Turk," he said. "You will need two good arms for what faces us in Russia."

Chapter Fourteen

It was cold when Kurtsev arrived at Voronezh, bitterly so. The skies looked as if any moment they would pour a mass of new snow onto the already snow-laden ground. The men and their horses were weary from the long night ride; they had followed the road from Azov that had been used by the Scandinavian Vikings over nine hundred years before.

Sampson stayed beside Kurtsev while Paul and Hassan rode with their four Russian guards. They were not challenged until they arrived at the gates of the huge grain storage sheds. Kurtsev then dismounted stiffly and showed his papers from the ambassador. Several soldiers, bored and seeing the mounted men at the gates, came over to investigate. They stood by as the papers were studied, peering curiously at the group whose long journey had lent them an air that better belonged to gypsies. One of the soldiers, examining Kurtsev through the iron gates, excitedly held a conversation with his companions, cossacks whose loyalty to Peter was in some doubt. They were a part of Ivan Mezeppa's army and their main forces were in the Ukraine.

"You are Kurtsev Bolinski, the bear killer. We thought you dead!" one of them called out suddenly.

The guard, finished with the papers of authorization, handed them back to Kurtsev. "Only a short time ago a Kurtsev Bolinski was sought as a traitor to the crown. Now you come bearing papers signed by our Russian ambassador to Turkey. Your papers appear to be in order, but—"

Georgi kicked his tired horse over to the gate and looked down at the guard. "I can explain, if you are not too stupid to understand. I think you know me—I am the ambassador's assistant."

The guard snapped to attention. He did know of Georgi's relationship to the diplomat and he felt like a fool. "Yes, sir," he bumbled. "I did not see you among the other horsemen. I am sorry sir."

"Kurtsev Bolinski was falsely accused, as was his father," Georgi continued. "They have been cleared of all charges and, furthermore, this young hero has been given the authority to take charge of all the wheat now in storage in Voronezh. He will also direct the gathering of any grain not yet harvested. Now open the gate and take us to your commanding officer."

Georgi, who had straightened up his tired shoulders admirably, moved his horse to one side and the guard escorted Kurtsev through the gate to his captain's outer office. Georgi, following behind them, was pleased with his effectiveness. The guard gave a timid knock, and when the captain hollered for them to enter, he opened the door.

The captain, a small man whose nervous eyes darted constantly from Kurtsev to Georgi and back, got to his feet. He stood ramrod straight, but he looked positively dwarfed next to the red-haired Russian who handed him the ambassador's orders.

"As you can read, captain," Georgi said, "Kurtsev Bolinski has been authorized to take charge of all of your wheat supplies. You and I will assist him in carrying out his orders."

A flush crept up the captain's neck and into his face. The paper in his hands trembled and his eyes held a burning hatred. Nevertheless he stretched to his full height and announced: "Captain Dimitri Minin, at your service, sir. What are your orders?"

He looked first at Kurtsev and then at Georgi who raised his hand and motioned toward the younger man, saying, "He is in charge."

Minin moved to one side and motioned Kurtsev toward his desk.

"I won't take your desk, captain," Kurtsev smiled. "As to orders, bring your inventories to Georgi here. We will need an immediate accounting of all supplies on hand, and also a statement of all the wheat yet to be brought in. I will buy, not conscript, all the necessary wagons and teams of horses and mules, but inform the farmers that they *must* sell to us. We will pay a fair price."

"But, sir," the captain interrupted, "our last communication from the ambassador instructed us to have barges ready to take the wheat down the river to the port of Azov. Why will we need wagons and horses?" He spread his arms in a gesture of bewilderment.

There was a moment of silence before Kurtsev answered. He looked first at Balin, who was wide-eyed with surprise in spite of his weariness. He had known all along that the ambassador wanted the wheat for himself, but he had no idea what Kurtsev had in mind.

"All the wheat we can get our hands on goes up the river to Czar Peter in Moscow," Kurtsev announced calmly.

There was but a moment's hesitation before the captain spoke. "It will be my pleasure to serve in this effort to feed our soldiers on the front lines," he said bowing his head slightly.

Kurtsev, unconvinced of the man's sincerity despite his response, decided he would do well to keep an eye on him. As for Balin, who had nodded unenthusiastically at Kurtsev's announcement, he would most certainly bear watching.

"Georgi will work with your bookkeepers on the inventory," Kurtsev said finally.

The captain directed the ambassador's cousin into a side office where a soldier was sitting with his feet on the desk.

"Attention!"

The soldier nearly lost his balance as he scrambled to his feet.

"Captain," Georgi commanded. "Kindly give this soldier your orders."

The captain, who was obviously suffering under the heavy pressure of the situation, found an outlet for his fury. Walking up to the soldier, he shouted, "I expect you to give full cooperation to this gentleman."

Kurtsev, standing directly behind him, coughed lightly. The captain turned and, with deliberate effort, lowered his voice. "The man is a dolt!" he said.

"How many men can you spare to go out for wagons and teams?" Kurtsev asked.

"Perhaps you would like to be shown to your quarters? I will have food sent and you can have a few hours' sleep while I prepare a report."

"I think not, but please see that my men are cared for. You and I will begin work immediately. There is no time to prepare a report; I want a thousand wagons and teams here in the next three days, so we must begin at once. We will, of course, also pay a fair wage for drivers."

The captain sat down heavily, his entire mien reflecting disbelief. "We will kill the horses in just getting out the order," he stammered.

"If a few horses must die to keep our army fed and our city from being taken, so be it. Now, let us begin."

The captain, seeing he had little recourse, went to the courtyard to give the orders. Kurtsev, who had accompanied him, called Sampson aside. "We've yet to deal with Count Dolgorsky, my friend. It seems the ambassador, Dolgorsky, and perhaps even our friend the captain, there, are all part of a conspiracy to take over the rule of Russia. I'm sure Georgi is in on it, too, but I have a feeling he is grateful to have the chance to make a stand with us now. He despises Menshekov and, besides, he's smart enough to know that we have a better chance of success. I don't even know why he came with us, but he might even be a source of strength in the end. I have asked for one thousand wagons, teams and drivers to be supplied in the next three days; Georgi is certainly better able than the rest of us to find them. The Russian soldiers who came with us are not from this part of the country, but I believe they will be loyal to their commitment to serve me—especially since Georgi is with us. I will put them in charge of the wagons and teams as they arrive and they can work with the local soldiers. Someone

will have to keep them in line. The men at this garrison are a part of the Dolgorsky contingent, and we may have to deal with them before the day is over. Now I suggest you get yourself and our men some food and a few hours' rest."

"I slept in the saddle same as you, my young friend, but I'll get some food for both of us—be right back." Sampson walked away quickly and upon his return found Kurtsev disclosing his plans to Georgi and the captain. "I will need you, captain, and a patrol of six men immediately. We should return by this time tomorrow. Sampson will be in charge during our absence."

"Where are we going?" the captain asked, concerned.

Kurtsev knew that his next words would reveal the captain's true sympathies. "You will accompany me to Count Dolgorsky's fortress and arrest him for treason," he said quietly, watching the blood drain from the officer's face. He looked as if he were about to faint and Sampson took a step toward him.

"It is nothing," Minin said, putting up a hand to stop the Greek. "Just a pain. It will soon pass." He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "As you are aware," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion, "our czar has spent much time away from Russia. There are factions who are opposed to his attempts to westernize our country; there are loyal cossacks, and there are also some who are not so loyal."

He reached into an open drawer and pulled out a half full bottle of vodka which he offered first to Kurtsev and then to the others. "No one for a drink to Russia?" he said bitterly, raising the bottle to his lips. Dropping the bottle back into the drawer, he continued speaking. "It is not always easy for a mere captain to keep abreast of what is going on. We sometimes have to make fundamental choices between our men and our country. Sometimes we make mistakes in judgment. I have heard nothing from the czar for many months; most of my orders have come through Dolgorsky, or from our Turkish ambassador, such as the one regarding the wheat. I understood, from both the count and Ivan Menshekov, it had been traded to the Turks."

"Up to now, captain, I have heard of no treasonable activity on your part. If you cooperate with me you will not be accused."

Captain Minin stared at Kurtsev. The vodka had brought out

tiny beads of sweat on his face. He wiped them away before he spoke. "Are you implying that, despite that fact that you believe I have been gathering wheat with the knowledge that it would be used against Czar Peter, you would be willing to help me?"

"You will recall that I was falsely accused of treason against Russia. I learned the feeling of despair, captain, when no one in authority would listen to my pleas of innocence. If you wish to plead innocence, I will listen. If you *are* innocent, I will help you."

The captain rose to his feet. "My father fought beside Michael Romanov, Peter's grandfather. My greatest desire is to stand at our ruler's side, but I have a responsibility here. I am a fighting man, in spite of my size, and I am well-schooled and experienced in the arts of warfare."

Kurtsev was impressed by the man's obvious sincerity. Before he could say as much, the captain continued. "Dolgorsky and Menshekov told me to take orders directly from them and no one else. Your orders admittedly stunned me at first, but I am now well pleased."

"Let us leave within the hour, captain," Kurtsev said, putting out his hand in a gesture of friendship. "You will formally make the arrest, and I will give you what protection I can against the count's accusations." Putting his hand on the little captain's shoulder, he said gently, "You are one of us now." Turning to Georgi, he said, "While we are gone, prepare a list of supplies and take an inventory of stores. As for you, Sampson, you know what to do."

Within the hour, Kurtsev was mounted on a fresh horse and riding beside the captain toward Count Dolgorsky's fortress. Behind them rode Paul, Hassan the Turk, and twenty guardsmen, all heavily armed and ready to do battle in defense of the throne of Russia.

Count Mikhail Dolgorsky lay on a sofa with his head resting on the lap of his Lithuanian slave. She was a large woman of some breeding and she was pleasant and cheerful. Her face was marked, as was her body, by old scars and fresh wounds inflicted by the count during his less languorous moods. She never complained, accepting the occasional blows as the price

she paid for good food and a bed that the count no longer shared. Her main function, since her master's injury, was to apply ointment to his scarred face. During the past weeks, her caressing fingers had loosened tight muscles and one of his eyelids, seared shut by the flames into which Kurtsev had thrown him, opened. Thanks to her he could see light and shadows, and she wore around her neck a gold chain with a precious stone set in silver, as a gesture of his appreciation for her efforts. Better still, it had been some time since he had given her a severe beating. She did find it difficult to understand why her master still used a cane and a guide dog to make his way about the castle, but since it was her function to accept his actions without question, she simply pushed it from her mind. It had occurred to her that he had found an ideal way to watch for signs of disloyalty or disrespect, for he had singled out a few close advisors for execution with amazing perspicacity. It didn't matter to her; her loyalty would never be in question.

She hummed the soft homeland tunes that he had become so fond of hearing, smiled, and continued to soothe his scorched face.

As for the count, he was using the melody as background for his imaginings. He could see Peter's defeat as surely as if it had already taken place, for without the wheat in the storage bins of Voronezh, the czar's army could not last through the winter. With Peter's defeat, he, Dolgorsky, would make concessions to the Swedish king, in return for which he would be crowned the new czar of Russia. He saw himself at the time of his coronation, pulling off his black hood and claiming a miracle from God, the restoration of his sight, a heavenly sign that he was the rightful heir to Russia's throne.

Reaching up suddenly, he grabbed the woman's hand and cried out, "Wait!"

Fearing a blow, the slave's arm flew up to protect her face. It did not come. The count rose to his feet and looked across the room. "I felt the lid of my eye open further. I can see you," he said, reaching out to touch her face.

He felt a tear run over his hand.

"Why are you crying?" he demanded. "I haven't hit you."

"I am happy that you can see me. I have prayed for the restoration of your sight."

Dolgorsky, ecstatic, grabbed his slave's hands and kissed them, saying, "I shall cover these hands with gems."

A knock at the door brought with it the sobering possibility of discovery. It would spoil his plans if it were known that he had one good eye. The slave woman herself presented a danger and he could not take a chance, not even for her soothing hands and homey tunes. The throne of Russia lay in the balance.

"I am not rested," he called out in answer to the knock at the door. "Come back in an hour."

The woman, hearing the count say that he wanted to rest, turned her back and began to pack away the herbs and ointments.

"Captain Minin and his soldiers are here from the shipyards. I will tell them that they must wait," the voice said.

The count listened intently to the receding footsteps. When he was absolutely certain that they were alone, he quietly removed a battleaxe from the wall and, balancing it in his hand, he brought the blunt end down on her head—she fell to the floor. The Count pulled her inert body into a closet. Taking the towels she had used on him, he tried to clean her blood from his carpet and then threw them into the closet where her limbs were twitching in a final gruesome imitation of life. It had been several months since he had seen blood and gore. He had heard the cries of the tortured that he had condemned, but he had missed the full enjoyment of his torture chambers.

A heavy knock at his door interrupted his pleasure. He threw a carpet over the floor stains, irritated that the captain had taken it upon himself to knock and not await formalities. The officer's usefulness would soon be over, and he could dispose of him, too. He smiled, found his black silk hood and quickly pulled it over his head. There was, by then, a commotion in the hallway, and he could hear demanding voices, so he shouted, "Come in." His servant was the first to enter, closely followed by two of Minin's men. Through the thin, black silk hood, he recognized the huge figure of the man Kurtsev Bolinski.

It took Dolgorsky's utmost self-control not to demand that his guards subdue and arrest his red-haired enemy. Clenching his fists, he concentrated upon the captain who came forward and addressed him. "Your Highness, I have here a letter from Ivan Menshekov. It gives Kurtsev Bolinski full authority to collect and deliver to Moscow and the czar, the stored wheat in Voronezh, as well as all the grain yet to be brought in from the fields."

The count had difficulty getting his thoughts in order and his one good eye glared through the silk hood at the face of his most hated enemy. He had offered generous rewards for Bolinski's death, and when they had been of no avail he had hoped to hear that the young giant had been killed in some foreign land. Now here he was, claiming to have authority in Russia.

"Impossible," Dolgorsky roared, no longer able to contain himself. "The Bolinskis are traitors. It is the duty of all loyal Russians to kill Kurtsev Bolinski on sight."

He slapped his hand down upon the table in a gesture designed to give him a chance to pick up the letter the captain had laid down. Minin, too fast for him, removed it.

"Captain," Dolgorsky thundered, "where are my own court guards?"

"Your soldiers have honored their oath to serve the czar in his defense of Moscow. They will assist me in placing you under arrest. You will be taken to Moscow for trial."

"Arrested for what? You have no proof of any treason on my part. Who will speak against me?"

The little captain stood straight and tall and spoke with a clear ring to his voice. "Your Highness, I can and will stand witness against you."

If you are the only witness, the count thought, other than the senile ambassador who has plans of his own, then I must rid myself of you. He debated the efficacy of using the battle-axe lying against the table leg to kill the officer there and then. No one could judge him for killing an insubordinate soldier. As for Bolinski and his men, let them take him to Moscow. That was where the man ought to be anyway, particularly one who had set his sights on the throne. He sat down in a chair. His hand

could, from that position, take hold of the axe handle unobserved once he had diverted the attention of the men.

"From what you have said, captain, I understand that the traitor Bolinski is here, but you have not read me the letter from Ambassador Menshekov. Sit close, Minin, and I will stay beside you so that I may hear better. My ears are not much better than my eyes."

The captain glanced nervously at Dolgorsky, then sat in the chair the count had vacated. The count stood easily, one hand on the back of the captain's chair and ready to reach for the axe.

Kurtsev stood impatiently at the side of the room, near the window. It had taken over an hour to convince the count's cossacks of their czar's need and of their punishment should they be proven traitors to the crown. Fortunately they were already restless and dissatisfied with their current lot, and though the movement of the wheat was of little account to them, they were essentially warriors and the thought of doing front-line battle swung them over.

As Kurtsev listened to the soft murmur of the captain's voice reading from Menshekov's letter, he indulged himself in memories of his last visit to Mikhail Dolgorsky's estate. Seeing the count with the black hood over his head, he felt remorse—not for what he had done, but because he had failed to break the man's neck. The muscles along his jaw rippled in his effort to control his raging emotions, but he gradually became aware that there was something amiss. He watched the dogs sniffing around the edges of the throw rug under the count's feet and his attention was drawn to the nap of the carpet which looked as if something heavy had recently been dragged across it. The rug was distressed in a line that led to a closet, and Kurtsev began to wonder what it was that the count had secreted in there. He looked closely at the man. His head was turned toward Minin in the manner of someone who was observing, rather than listening. Perhaps it was his own heightened sense of betrayal, playing games with his imagination because of what he had experienced in this room with his father. Still something did not feel right.

Making a decision, Kurtsev moved as quietly and as carefully

as he could toward the closet door. One of the hounds followed him and poked his nose against the crack under the door, whining softly, deep in his throat, and the young man glanced at Dolgorsky to make sure he was not being observed. Something made him aware that the count was no longer concentrating on the letter that was being read—the dog, perhaps, who seemed inordinately fascinated by what was happening behind Captain Minin's back.

He took two strides toward the count who chose that moment to jerk off his silk mask and raise the axe for a downward swing at the captain's defenseless head. Kurtsev's long arm reached out. He grasped the nobleman's wrist and crushed his fingers together, until the bone snapped and the axe fell to the floor from a useless hand.

Count Dolgorsky struck at Kurtsev blindly with his other hand. He had a madman's desire to tear and rip the face of his enemy. It was nothing more than a hopeless, last gesture of defiance, and he soon lay manacled and helpless upon the blood of the woman he had killed less than an hour before.

Within the three days set by Kurtsev, more than a thousand wagons had been loaded with wheat and supplies. Every soldier and civilian driver had worked to the utmost of his capacity and endurance, spurred on by the thought that they were saving Russian soldiers from starvation. When the wagons were at last rolling on their way to Moscow, Kurtsev, Sampson, Paul and Hassan stretched out on top of the loaded wheat in utter exhaustion. They slept soundly as the wagons moved slowly along the roads, escorted by three thousand horse-soldiers and another two thousand on foot. The captain and special guards rode beside one particular wagon, that which held the count chained to the wagon-bed. After multiple and unsuccessful attempts to bribe his way free, he had retired into a sullen silence broken only by complaints about the ruts and bumps of the road and threats about what he would do to all of them when he was czar.

The loads were heavy and there was constant need for axles and wheels to be repaired or replaced. All the spare parts that could be found in Voronezh had been brought along, and most

of them would be used before the journey's end—some reused several times.

The first night on the road, it snowed. The following day a cold mist hung over the River Don. Ice would soon form, and it would not be many days until all water traffic would halt. Occasionally, small patrols of soldiers passed them, or the peasants in the villages looked hungrily at the loads of grain on their way to the front. But Kurtsev's convoy was increasingly cheered as it neared the battlefield. As they got closer, they noticed an increase in field hospitals which had been set up in the churches and schools to care for the wounded and dying. Kurtsev left a wagonload of wheat at each of these centers, often leaving the vehicle itself if it was beyond repair.

Georgi's credentials opened the sentry lines, but Kurtsev, Sampson, and Hassan were looked on with obvious disapproval.

"It is your beards," Georgi said. "The czar looks unfavorably on them, and very few are seen this close to his headquarters."

"It takes a man to grow a beard," the Turk said, "and it will take a big man to remove mine."

"Your beards may be giving you trouble," Georgi grumbled. "My problem is easier to conceal but harder to deal with. I'll never walk the same again; I have blisters on blisters," he said, not anxious to face another hard ride in the saddle. His face and nose were red from the wind and cold, and his hands were chapped and raw, but it was the portion of his anatomy where flesh met saddle that troubled him most.

Kurtsev and Sampson laughed. "I have heard of men being given the choice of shaving or of going to their grave with their beards," Kurtsev said. "Your blisters will cure themselves."

The road became more and more congested with wounded soldiers—some walking, some riding, and others being carried on litters. When the traffic came to a standstill Kurtsev asked the man at his side, "How is our war going, major? We have just come in from the south and we have had no news."

The major studied the men before him—a Turk, a Greek, and two Russians. The one Russian looked normal, but the others were giants.

"We have credentials, major," Georgi said, seeing the man's hesitation. "We are bringing food supplies. I am sure you have need of them."

"Need! We've been retreating for weeks and have had to burn everything as we left. Hundreds of peasants retreated with us because there was nothing left for them to live on, and they could not be left to face the Swedish king's butchery." He spat out the words.

"I would like to know more about King Charles," Kurtsev said. "I believe he is something of a genius."

The major gave Kurtsev a look of disbelief. "The less you know of him the better. Sweden is our ancient enemy and Charles, who is as big as you are, is an eighteen-year-old wild man. He loves street fights, he rides his horses to death, and he's had the devil's own luck in driving us across our own lands."

The traffic began to move, and the major waved farewell.

When Kurtsev's party came to the city garrison, they stabled their horses and were guided to the palace. There they learned that starting in July, Czar Peter had refused to engage in battle and the Russians were retreating slowly, destroying crops and food on their way. This confirmed what the major had said. They were told that the czar had now formed a plan. He knew the Swedes were short of food and were beginning to suffer. Their king, Charles, had gone into the Ukraine to join the traitor Ivan Mezeppa, the cossack leader. He had secretly agreed to raise thirty thousand men, join Charles and supply him with food. That was a tactical error for the Swedish ruler. It split his forces. The czar was now planning to mobilize and send a force to the Ukraine, seize Mazeppa and burn the capital.

They climbed marble steps to the first floor of the palace where a young guard turned them over to the desk officer. Kurtsev noticed that this man's leg was missing and the stump still in bandages. He asked them to sit down on benches against the wall, telling them it would be a while before the czar could see them. They did as they were told, with the exception of Georgi who pulled up a chair next to the official, and proceeded to go over his list of supplies. Hassan sat on one bench, and Kurtsev and Paul took the other. All were glad of

the warmth of the wood fire burning near the officer's desk. Kurtsev, seeing the lines of pain etched in the soldier's face, knew the man was suffering. I would rather die than live my life as a cripple, he thought.

When Georgi's work was completed, a messenger was immediately sent to the local garrison's commanding officer telling him to await the shipment of wheat. Since the desk officer had already been distracted from his own work by Georgi's report, Kurtsev asked leave to question him.

"What is this I hear about Czar Peter not liking beards?" he asked.

The officer looked from Georgi's close-shaven face to Kurtsev's short, flaming red beard. Paul's, he saw, was black and coarse and hung over his collar and Hassan, who had trimmed his close for his fight with Kurtsev, now had the longest beard of all.

"The czar spent much of his time in Europe where the men are clean-shaven. He feels it is time for Russian men to modernize and look civilized."

"How tall is the czar?" Sampson asked.

"Almost seven feet," the man answered. "I'd say as tall as you, sir, and as heavy," he went on, motioning toward Kurtsev.

Before Kurtsev could respond, some officers came in and walked up to the desk officer to state their business with the czar. When they had been directed to seats the official continued his conversation.

"Our czar is a very unusual man. He has learned fifteen trades, and has welded an axe to help build the navy that defeated the Turks at Azov."

"It took two tries, and you outnumbered us the last time," Hassan bellowed, jumping to his feet.

"Maybe next time you will beat us, my friend," the desk officer smiled.

Hassan returned the smile despite his momentary loss of temper and settled back on the bench. "Peter served as a corporal in his own army. He hates being fawned on and therefore often prefers the company of foreigners to his own Russian noblemen."

"Is he easy to get along with?" Hassan asked boldly.

"It has been said that he is more fierce than Ivan the Terrible, but only toward lazy or corrupt Russians," the officer said, just as a huge man in stableman's clothing and with the smell of horses about him, came across the polished floors and sat down beside Hassan so abruptly that the Turk fell to the floor. The man looked in the opposite direction, completely ignoring the furious wrestler's anger. Hassan rose to his feet and reached out to take hold of the rude fellow. His hand never reached him, for the man ducked to one side, grabbed Hassan's arm and sat him down again. Putting his hand easily on the Turk's broad shoulder, he smiled at Kurtsev and Sampson. "Welcome to Moscow," he bellowed. "I've heard the good news, and I thank you on behalf of all of Russia. I believe we have much to talk of."

"Gentlemen," the desk officer said, grinning, "may I introduce you to our czar!"

Chapter Fifteen

The handsome, smiling man who was the ruler of all Russia was a young man with an obvious zest for life. He put his other arm around Kurtsev's shoulder and began to lead Bolinski and the Turk from the room. When he saw other men waiting to see him, he said, "Come along, my friends. We'll soon have enough for a party."

Hassan was grinning and Kurtsev and Paul were won over immediately by the czar's affable manner. They entered the reception room in high spirits. There were already several members of the royal staff there, a few of them nobles who looked upon the motley-looking new arrivals with an air of aloofness.

Czar Peter held his hand up to get their attention. "Gentlemen," he called out. "I have important information. Some of you may know Kurtsev Bolinski. Certainly you all know of his father, Alexandr Bolinski, and his great loyalty to Russia. He was one of my most trusted and capable commanders. Now his son has delivered fifteen hundred tons of wheat which will win the war for us."

The men were ecstatic. There had already been some rationing of food and they had been convinced the war could no longer be won; men could not march on empty stomachs.

"My czar, what of Mezeppa?" one of the high ranking officers asked Peter. "It is said that King Charles is joining him."

"Mezeppa is a traitor. He does not realize that by making the Swede split his forces he has sealed his doom. Besides, the cossack cannot raise the men he promised."

There were murmurs of satisfaction before Peter continued. "I plan to send an army to burn his capital. The threat to Voronezh must be broken. If Charles takes that city, our lifeline to the Black Sea will be cut off. Too much Russian blood has been spilled in securing the port of Azov for us to lose it through a Russian traitor. I give this honor of protecting our homeland to you, Kurtsev. It is fitting that Alexandr Bolinski's son lead the expedition."

All eyes turned to Kurtsev who bowed his head in acceptance of the honor and the challenge. He walked up to Peter and looked him in the eyes, for they were the same height and matched each other in size.

"I would be most honored to lead my father's men in battle," he said.

Peter threw his arms around Kurtsev and gave him a great bear hug which broke the solemnity of the moment. Together they walked, laughing, through the crowd of men to a huge banquet table in the center of the room where food and drink were being served.

Peter raised his glass and in a stentorian voice said, "I give you Commander Kurtsev Bolinski. May his life be long and full of excitement!" He then sat down at the head of the table, Kurtsev on one side and Hassan on the other.

By the looks of things, the desk officer was right about Peter's liking for foreigners, Kurtsev thought, after an hour of eating and drinking had mellowed the group into an exchange of toasts and light talk. He was amazed at Peter's capacity for alcohol. He had heard that no man had yet been able to stay the course with the czar in his drinking and he was about to make a comment about it when Peter rose and said, "I

challenge the Turkish hero, Hassan, but not to fight—to drink!”

Hassan had already imbibed a fair amount, but he could not resist a challenge. “I accept,” he said grandly, rising to his feet. “This or any other invitation, whether drinking or fighting. Perhaps we should drink first and fight later.”

Peter laughed and slapped the big Turk on the shoulder. “You are a man after my own heart. First we drink.”

It was apparently not uncommon for Peter to engage in this kind of boisterous activity. Without waiting for instructions, the servants placed six glasses before each man and filled them. Apparently there had been many heavy drinking bouts before. Peter’s eyes were dancing as he and the Turk raised their first glasses. They did not stop until all were empty and the servants leaned over to refill them. Having had time to breathe deeply, the two men began again.

It was becoming evident to Kurtsev that Peter would indeed be the winner. The Turk was game, but he was not really a drinker, having abstained for many years during training. The strong Russian rye finally took its toll. After the eighth glass Hassan fell slowly forward onto the table, a wide grin on his unconscious face. As for Peter, he finished his twelfth glass, raised it over his head and dashed it against the far wall where it broke into tiny pieces that glowed like jewels in the torchlight.

His guests cheered and Peter laughed and took a bow. Then he ordered four servants to carry the big Turk to a sofa where he snored, peacefully asleep, for the rest of the night.

“It is time for speeches,” Peter announced cheerfully when Hassan’s body had been removed.

The glasses were refilled, fresh food and fruits were brought to the table and Peter, seemingly unaffected by his drinking, turned to one of the officers and engaged him in serious conversation about the order of the speeches. “How is it possible that the czar is not affected by all that alcohol?” Kurtsev asked the officer at his side.

“Peter could drink all night with no more effect than if he were drinking water,” the officer laughed.

As if to prove Kurtsev’s dinner companion right, Peter stood

and made a report on the progress of the war before he asked Kurtsev to take the floor and tell them how he had managed to bring them the supplies they so desperately needed.

Feeling a little dizzy, Kurtsev staggered to his feet. He braced himself slightly by placing his hand on the table, his feet wide apart and gave his report. The guests reacted with outrage at the Menshekov family's manipulations and with anger at Count Dolgorsky's treachery, but the tale of how the wheat was diverted to Moscow was greeted with enthusiastic cheers. The inevitable glasses were raised to Kurtsev, and again to the other speechmakers who followed him. There were those who, like Hassan, fell asleep at the table. The czar however, continued vibrant and full of energy. He called for musicians and danced with skill and energy and strength on a cleared table, inviting anyone to join him who could.

There were no volunteers.

Grabbing Kurtsev by the arm he said, "Come, my newest commander. I will teach you a *man's* dance."

Kurtsev, who felt he could not refuse the czar's pleasure, climbed upon the table with some difficulty. When he tried to stand up, Peter caught him and held on. Throwing his head back in boisterous laughter, he began the vigorous steps which Kurtsev followed as best he could.

"I'm sorry now that I am sending you away, my friend. We could have much fun together," Peter said when the music stopped. He called for servants to bring more food and drink and to open the drapes to let in the morning light.

Kurtsev glanced out. The sight of snow sobered him up. It would be a cold march to Baturin, Mezeppa's capital, he thought. Peter's commanding voice broke into his speculation.

"I have beaten the Turk, and I have won the honor of being his barber," the czar declared, holding up a pair of scissors.

Before his rye-dulled friends could protest, Peter had cut off the Turk's beard. The action wakened Hassan and still drunk, he grabbed the wrist of the hand holding his severed beard. Uttering a wild oath, he pulled Peter to the floor where the two huge men rolled and punched until their muscles shone with the sweat of their efforts and their shirts were torn to rags. Finally, exhausted, they rolled on their sides, looked into each

other's bloodshot eyes, and with a burst of laughter helped each other to their feet and embraced.

Hassan felt the stub of hair on his chin, all that was left of his beard and looked at Kurtsev. "I said it would require a man to remove my beard, and it was a real man that took it." He turned to Peter. "What about you and I taking the beards from these fellows?"

Peter laughed easily. "Your beard and theirs are now about the same length. With winter coming on, you'll need some fur on your faces to keep from freezing. Let me ask you a question, Kurtsev. Will the Turk and the Greek go with you when you go after Mezeppa?"

Sampson spoke without waiting for Kurtsev to respond. "We have talked it over. We both wish to go with Commander Bolinski. Also my countryman Paul who is with the supply wagons."

Peter smiled his agreement. "I am well pleased. I will see that you are suitably rewarded when you return."

"Your Highness, we want no pay or reward," Sampson said firmly. "We wish to serve under Kurtsev, and when your orders have been carried out, we wish to accompany him to Amsterdam."

The czar looked soberly at Kurtsev and the two men. "With such friends as these, your enemies should beware," he said. "I was hoping to test my strength against you, Greek, in a friendly bout, but the importance of war outweighs even my pleasure. Perhaps another time."

Peter stopped and thought for a moment, then held up his hand for silence and addressed Kurtsev with a seriousness that hardly seemed possible after so many hours of merriment. "When you have defeated Mezeppa, I will see to it that your family home is restored to you. Perhaps then you will bring your bride back to Russia. This is your country. I would like you to raise a family here in peace. You will also be well paid for your father's wheat."

He slapped Kurtsev and Hassan on the back.

"Now to the baths, my friends. You may have fresh clothes from my own wardrobe. I will have a surprise for you within the next hour, Kurtsev. I will send for you when it is time."

He turned away and called his staff together and they went straight from the night's carousing to begin the day's work.

Kurtsev, Sampson and Hassan were led across carpeted floors through the palace to the rooms they would occupy for a brief time. When they entered the baths, servants with long-handled brushes were waiting to scrub them, and the tiled walls and floors were covered with steam from the large tubs which were filled with hot water. Kurtsev and Sampson were soon submerged, but Hassan directed the servants to fill pails and pour water over him as he stood in the tub. "Moslems never bathe in still water," he said, answering Kurtsev's questioning look as the servants soaped and scrubbed him.

After they had washed, the men's hair was trimmed and they were massaged with ointments. Peter's clothes were waiting for them when they returned to the bedroom, expensive outfits of French design.

"I'd rather sleep than get into these fancy clothes," Sampson grumbled.

Hassan was standing before a huge pier glass admiring the strange look of the clothes on his body. "We do need sleep if we are to fight the cossacks. How soon do we plan to leave?" He fingered his hairless chin for a moment then added, "I don't like those cossacks, but I never thought I would be part of a Russian army told to fight them."

"Perhaps we can make good cossacks out of bad ones," Kurtsev suggested with a grin. "These have slaughtered over two hundred thousand Jews, I am told."

A tap on the door brought the message that Peter was ready to receive Kurtsev. "You two get some sleep and that way I know you'll keep out of trouble. I'll be back soon to keep an eye on you." He grinned as they both came to attention and saluted him.

"Yes, sir!" they said in unison.

The messenger led Kurtsev to Peter's private quarters and left him in a small anteroom. An inner door opened and a hand beckoned Kurtsev inside. Peter was seated on a sofa with one arm around a beautiful blond woman. Kurtsev had heard of her. She was Catherine Skavronskaya, the woman whom Peter had recently married in his personal place of worship—the

Cathedral of the Holy Trinity. She had already borne him several children, and the union with his mistress had displeased many of the Russian nobility, but they were appeased by the fact that only Catherine could calm him at the rare times when his temper was at breaking point.

Peter rose and came forward to take Kurtsev's arm. "My dear," he said, turning to the woman, "this is the man of whom I spoke, my new commander." He turned a smiling face to Kurtsev. "And this is Catherine, the real ruler of Russia!"

Catherine, laughing, held out her shapely white hand for Kurtsev's kiss. Peter's arm went around her waist and he continued. "This lady has shared my huts and my hardships; she has soothed my rages and shared my concerns. She is a woman of charm and beauty and wisdom. And she is now my empress."

Smiling at her young husband's gallant speech, Catherine spoke to Kurtsev in a low pleasing voice. "Please sit here beside me. I hear that you, too, have a bride, but you have left her to help Peter win the war."

The czar went to the door and snapped his fingers. A moment later he came back holding up for Kurtsev's inspection a long fur coat with a high collar. It was richly handsome, with a crimson-satin lining. Excitedly he called out, "Excuse me, my empress, but Kurtsev must try on his new winter coat."

He held it aloft while Kurtsev slipped it on, his hands sliding over the rich fur. The skins were from a mountain bear and had been taken during the late fall when the new fur had just grown in. Kurtsev wrapped the coat luxuriously around him and thought of the bear he had wrestled and killed. He laughed at the thought that it could have come from the same area.

"What?" Peter cried. "You laugh at my gift?"

Kurtsev told him of his experience in the arena and added, "This is a most wonderful gift, and I am extremely grateful. I shall do my utmost to be worthy of it."

"But this is not the surprise that I promised you, my friend. Wait here and I will see if that is ready for you," Peter said, almost bouncing out of the room.

Catherine gave a low laugh. "You are good for him, commander. It has been a long time since I have seen him this excited and happy. Hunger has been stalking us like a wild

animal, and with it, defeat. Now, with the supplies you have brought to us, Peter sees victory for his country, and food for the bellies of his people. You have given him new hope, and if you can subdue Mezeppa, you will give us even more."

Kurtsev was facing Catherine. It was only when she looked past him that he realized that Peter had returned, and he turned around to include the czar in the conversation.

Peter laughing, gently pushed the girl at his side forward.

"Kurtsev, may I present to you your little sister, Katya."

He reached for Catherine's hand and drew her with him to the door.

Its click released Kurtsev's muscles and brother and sister rushed into each other's arms, both sobbing unrestrainedly until they found themselves on the sofa, the girl clinging to Kurtsev as if she never wanted to let go.

"Katya, I was sure I heard you call out my name as you were dying. Father and I were locked in a cell and there was nothing we could do except feel our hearts bleed for you. Tell me what happened? What about mama—and our sister? It is a miracle that I have found you—and with the czar."

"What happened in our house is beyond my telling, Kurtsev. I only remember impressions of blood and fire and death. By the time I was rational again, I found myself locked in a small cell with many Jewish people. We were there for two days with almost no water and only some scraps of meat that none of us could eat for hearing the screams of those outside being tortured and killed. We knew it would soon be our turn to die, but were too dazed to resist."

"Why were you being held with the Jews, Katya?"

The girl shrugged.

"Esther's young brother Moses was in the cell with us," she went on. "At first he was too shocked to recognize me. When he did he told the guards that I was Russian and from the Bolinski family. They just laughed at him and said that the Bolinskis were all traitors and must die. They kept hauling off people and I could hear their screams even in my sleep."

She buried her face in her brother's shoulder for a long while, and he gently caressed her hair. She looked up at him again with tear-drenched eyes and her voice trembled.

"Kurtsev, the voice you heard calling your name could have been my friend, Esther."

Kurtsev gently took her hands in his and held them to his chest. "Katya dear, listen to me. Esther is not dead."

Katya's mouth dropped open and she stared at her brother uncomprehendingly, the tears wet on her cheeks. "Kurtsev, what are you saying?"

Kurtsev gathered the girl back into his arms, "My little sister, I would that you had not suffered. But again I say, Esther is not dead. She is my wife. Do you hear me? Esther is my wife," Kurtsev said again and again, as his sister's sobs broke out anew.

Gradually Katya's sobs diminished and her tears released her from the sadness and grief of the past weeks. She listened wide-eyed as Kurtsev told her of his experiences.

"Then it must have been you and Esther who opened our cell door," she said when he had finished. "We were one of the last to leave, Moses and I. We were too late to get onto the barges, so we hid and used the nights to travel toward Moscow. One of the czar's patrols found us sleeping and took us before Peter, who asked his wife to take me in until he could decide what to do."

"Katya, what of Esther's brother, Moses? What happened to him?"

He has gone down the River Don to Azov. I haven't heard from him, but I am sure he is well. He wants to find his older brother."

"He will be all right as long as he stays in touch with his people. The Jews are as one big family and take care of their own."

"You and Esther married!" Katya repeated. "Where is she, Kurtsev? I want to welcome her as my sister."

"I have sent her to Holland with Menasseh ben Yakov. She will be safe there. The ben Yakov family have been good friends to us; I shall take you to them when I leave."

The girl's face looked troubled and Kurtsev reached to touch her cheek with his finger. She grasped it in her small fist and with the other hand reached to caress his flaming red hair and then his cheek. "You *are* real. I had thought you dead or in

some terrible prison. And I was so sure that Esther was also gone. I can't believe you are not part of a lovely dream. But, I still cannot go to Holland with you. Do not go into battle—I could not bear to lose you again—and think of Esther—in that faraway land, not knowing what had ever happened to you. You must go at once and get her and bring her back here to our home."

"What do you mean, Katya? Of course you will come with me," Kurtsev said sternly, holding her away from him and looking into her eyes. "And I must do my duty for the czar as father would have done. I have given my word." He gathered her close to him again to comfort her, saying, "You have been through too much, little sister, to worry further. I am here now to care for you."

"But Kurtsev, I am in love. I must stay here in Russia—in Voronezh—to be near him. You have to understand."

Kurtsev looked intently at Katya. In the few months since he had seen her, she had become a woman. Her experiences, the uncertainties, the forced independence, had made a woman of his merry, loving, fun-loving little sister. She was like their mother, he thought; soft as velvet and yielding on the surface, tough and resilient as iron underneath. "But who, Katya? With whom have you fallen in love? One of Peter's officers?"

"It is someone I have known for some time. I have only recently come to be sure that I love him. You shall know tonight. He will be at the ball. He does not yet know that I am going to marry him, but I will give him my answer before the dance is over."

"Now that I am here, Katya, it is my responsibility to care for you. You are very young to know your heart. I must insist that you make no commitments that I may have to break for you. You had best wait until I have had a chance to determine his suitability. It is surely unnecessary to make a decision tonight. Let us first have a little time together," Kurtsev coaxed.

"Oh, you already know him. I have no doubt that you will approve." Her eyes grew steady and grave. "Besides, my brother, I would go with him in any case—whether you approved or not. But do not judge yet," she added.

"This party, or ball as you call it—surely women are not invited. Russian tradition . . ."

"Peter has changed all that, Kurtsev. We are being westernized—no beards, women at balls, no veils for the women—this is a new, modern society. When the czar and his entourage were in France, he heard them call his people 'baptized bears' and he decided the time had come to make some changes. He has met with much violent opposition, but the czar will have his way—as you have seen." Katya reached to stroke her brother's short beard and laughed. "It would be well to shave this muff, my brother. Why not let the lovely ladies of the court see your fine skin, and perhaps be jealous of your Esther." She threw herself impulsively into his arms again. "I'm teasing you, Kurtsev. I love the way you are. And do not concern yourself over my choice of a husband; I am sure you will approve."

There was a knock at the door, and Kurtsev strode to open it. "Yes?" he asked the servant standing there.

"I am sorry to disturb you, sir, but there is an urgent message for you."

He produced a folded paper. Katya came to her brother's side and looked over his arm to read it with him. "Your presence is requested at the hearing of Count Mikhail Dolgorsky."

"I will take you there when you are ready, sir," the servant said, glancing at Katya and blushing before he dropped his eyes.

Kurtsev saw the messenger's look of admiration. He put his hand across his sister's shoulders and said quietly, "My sweet little sister, do not let the loneliness you have experienced lead you into a situation you may come to regret. You have many years before you need to marry. Think of all the young men you have yet to dance with. Please be careful, for both our sakes; if you are unhappy, then I shall be unhappy too."

"Sir, we should go." The servant came close again.

Kurtsev kissed Katya on the cheek and turned to follow the servant down the stairs, glancing back at the room that held his unpredictable sister and sighed as he walked briskly along behind the messenger. They walked down several stairways, through different levels of the palace, each lit by torches

burning at the end of long iron rods set into the stone walls. When at last they came to a halt before a heavily-studded door and the servant rapped sharply for it to be opened, Kurtsev dismissed the thought of his sister for later and began to concentrate on the business at hand—the trial of Count Mikhail Dolgorsky.

Chapter Sixteen

Kurtsev felt his stomach muscles tighten. The room he entered had iron doors which led to cells not unlike the one in which he and his father were once confined. The memories flooded back into Kurtsev's mind and left him feeling weak and sick. At the far end of the room he could see a platform supporting a long table where several men were seated. They had apparently been waiting for him before they commenced and he was immediately directed to the witness bench against the wall. He gave a slight nod to Captain Minin whom he had not seen since he had left him in charge of the caravan. The officer sat bolt upright, his face pale, his hands clasped together in his lap.

The loud bang of an iron door being unbolted echoed through the room and all eyes went to Count Dolgorsky as he entered. While the door was open Kurtsev could hear moans, and the faint grinding of the torture wheel. His face beaded with sweat at the knowledge of what went on in the darkness beyond the door.

Count Dolgorsky was bound in chains. His long coat and trousers were filthy. He looks like a moldy spider, Kurtsev

thought with revulsion, turning away from the virulent look in the count's good eye.

Raising his fettered arms, the count took a step toward Kurtsev and screamed, "Traitor! Traitor! These chains should envelop you."

The guards dragged him back and up two steps to the chair where he was forced to be seated.

Three judges sat in the center of the table. They wore wigs, were clean-shaven, and had dark robes over their shoulders. The middle judge, the spokesman, gave instructions. "The guards will keep the prisoner quiet by whatever means are necessary," he said dispassionately. The jurist had a long face, stern eyes, and a thin slash for a mouth. "The two witnesses will answer the questions put to them quickly and precisely. Perjury is punishable by death."

The judge directed his eyes to the count.

"You, Count Mikhail Dolgorsky, are accused of treason to the crown and to Russia."

"Lies—all lies—"

Dolgorsky's words were cut off as the guard expertly twisted the thin strangling rope around the prisoner's neck.

"We will hear testimony now," the judge continued calmly. "Captain, will you please come forward and take the chair?"

The captain moved as directed.

"Please tell us your name and rank, sir."

"I am Dimitri Minin, and I have the rank of captain."

"Where were you born?"

"In Voronezh, on the River Don, Your Honor."

The judge gave the captain a hard stare. "I know where Voronezh is, captain. Answer my question without embellishment. Our time for this hearing is limited. Where was your last assignment, captain?"

"The port of Voronezh."

"What was your responsibility there?"

"To protect the port against invasion and to protect the czar's supplies."

"By what authority did you leave your post?" the judge asked coldly, looking down his strong nose at the captain who was fast becoming uneasy at the line of questioning. "I asked for quick answers, captain," the judge rapped out. "You

should not need time to consider truthful answers. If there is any more of this delay, you will be found in contempt of this court."

"Yes, Your Honor. I was presented with a letter from Ivan Menshekov, the Russian ambassador to Turkey. It was given to me by Commander Kurtsev Bolinski, who was authorized to direct my activities."

"Where is this letter?"

Captain Minin looked over rather desperately at Kurtsev, who rose and said, "Your Honor, I am sure Czar Peter would be happy to satisfy any doubts you may have, pertaining to this matter. The captain has brought needed supplies to Moscow from Voronezh."

"Guard, you will remove Kurtsev Bolinski from this room until we are ready for his testimony," the judge said abruptly.

Kurtsev felt his anger rising. He knew he could easily overpower the guard, but to what avail? He turned and allowed himself to be escorted into the cell area from which the count had been brought. The soldier motioned him to a bench, and when Kurtsev was seated, an iron strap was fitted to his leg and he was manacled. When the guard left him, he closed and bolted the door.

The chamber was dimly lit and Kurtsev could scarcely see. Behind him were small cells with holes in the doors, just large enough for food and water to be passed through. Only a few minutes ago he had been with Katya in the czar's chambers; only last night the czar had given him the command of his father's legions. He clenched his jaw in his efforts to maintain serenity, trying to understand how he had suddenly become a prisoner.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light Kurtsev began to make out the forms of half-dead men, hanging by their arms from chains in the walls. From the palace rooms overhead, he heard the light laughter of a woman, and the clink of a glass, and he concentrated on that sound. When he found himself unable to distract himself with such trivia, he turned his thoughts to his bride. Where was she at this moment? Perhaps on the high seas with Menasseh and Anna and their family, a family such as the one he wanted for himself. What a beautiful mother Esther would make. Children—family—that was what life was all

about; the future, the memories. Without family there was loneliness and futility and frustration. When he had completed this new mission for the czar, he would return to Esther and they would begin their family—build their future. He thought of holding her in his arms and almost cried out in the pain of longing. One of the half-dead men hanging against the wall caught his eye. His sagging mouth rasped, "Water—water," in a rough whisper, his stomach convulsing with the effort of speech. His dry, hacking cough could be heard above the moans of the other prisoners.

There was an urn of water across from Kurtsev. He stretched as far as he could with his shackled leg and found he was able to grasp the handle. Stretching as far as he could in the man's direction, he tried to lift it to his lips, pouring some water into the open mouth. Most, however, ran down over the man's chin and onto the floor.

"Swallow, man. Swallow," Kurtsev commanded firmly. Again he poured water into the open mouth, again it was of no use. The man was too far gone to understand or control the muscles of his mouth. Helplessly Kurtsev set the jug down beside him just as the guard returned. The man released Kurtsev and directed him back to the judge's chambers. The young Russian, utterly confused, saw that the captain was no longer in the room, and the count appeared to be asleep.

"Your name, please."

"Kurtsev Bolinski."

At the sound of Kurtsev's voice, the count's eye opened and he turned a fierce gaze upon his enemy.

"You have evidence against the accused?"

"I saw orders from Czar Peter, commanding the count to lead his troops to Moscow. He . . ."

"Lies . . . all lies," the count yelled. He was again forced to be silent.

"Do you have the dispatch on your person, Kurtsev Bolinski?"

"No, Your Honor, but—"

"We are only interested in tangible evidence," the judge barked. He shifted about in his chair and whispered to the men on either side of him. Turning back to Kurtsev, he asked, "Do you have any real evidence against the count?"

"I saw barbarians who are known enemies of the czar at the count's fortress."

"Anything else?"

"No, Your Honor."

"The count has facial disfigurements and has been blinded. Can you tell us how he received those injuries?"

"I escaped from his prison. He was torturing a friend, and I pushed his face into a bed of hot coals." Kurtsev was sweating, as much from the recollections as from the direction the questions were taking. It was almost as though he was the one on trial! The room felt excessively warm, and suddenly he felt the futility of trying to convince the judge of the rampant inhumanity of the man who had brought suffering and death to so many innocent people. Only the thought of the torture chambers helped him control his temper.

"It is a serious crime to break from jail," the judge said, calmly and coldly. "Causing bodily harm is also a serious crime. You should have made a formal charge. All crimes should be dealt with through the proper authorities."

Kurtsev's throat worked with his effort to control a sense of injustice. He'd been brought to give evidence against a criminal, and now it seemed he was under indictment.

"We will deal with your breaking from jail later on. For now, did you have the authority to inflict punishment on the count?"

"Yes. The law that allows a man to protect his property and the lives of the innocent," Kurtsev exploded.

"What property were you protecting?"

"The body of my friend!"

"There is no law that gives anyone that kind of authority," the judge said pompously. He turned and conferred with his associates. "We agree that it was your duty to call upon a civil authority to handle your grievance." He consulted his notes then asked, "Why were you in jail?"

"My father and I were accused of being traitors." Kurtsev felt the perspiration building on his face, and he watched as the count slid forward in his chair. He started to speak and then controlled himself and remained silent.

"I am only interested in why you were in jail, not your father. Why were you accused of being a traitor?"

"The accusation was false. I have always been loyal to the czar."

"He gave Russian wheat to the Jews, he . . ." The count spoke quickly but his words were stopped by the angry guard.

"And were you selling wheat to Jews?" the judge thundered.

"Yes, but . . ."

"That is all for now."

Kurtsev waited for the judge's next words. This time there was no way he would allow himself to be taken behind the iron door—not alive, anyway.

"Guard, take this witness from our chambers. Kurtsev Bolinski, you are not to leave the palace without my permission. There will be further questioning," the judge said.

Shrugging off the guard's hand, Kurtsev wheeled around and went directly to his quarters. Sampson and Hassan were gone. He looked for Katya, but she was nowhere to be found. He finally found Captain Minin directing the storing of the wheat and guiding teamsters' wagons toward the docks to be unloaded by the crews. As each empty wagon drew away, the next driver moved into place until most of the wagons had been unloaded and pulled into sheds to be made ready to carry supplies to the battlefronts. Meanwhile the wheat would be ground and other supplies gathered.

When the captain saw Kurtsev he walked rapidly toward him. "I had hoped that the czar would be there to give us some support," he said, referring to the trial. "I hear that he has left for the front lines."

Kurtsev's eyebrows raised, then he said dryly, "If he doesn't get back soon, we could very likely be spending the winter in one of his jails. Have you seen Sampson or Paul or Hassan?"

"They were here only a few minutes ago. They have gone to the baths and then to the tailor. They said you were paying all the costs." His eyes were amused.

Kurtsev reappraised the captain. He had proven himself by completing the monumental task of moving more than a thousand wagonloads of supplies in just a few days, and he knew it. He stood like a cocky bantam; it was obvious he had fully recovered from the ardors of the journey and the trial. Kurtsev put his hand on the little man's shoulder and squeezed lightly. "Yes, it is true that I will pay, so why don't you and I

join them? I don't know about you, but I certainly could do with a good bath and some new clothes.

The captain gave a few last orders to his men. "They are getting clean-shaven," he laughed. "They have heard that the czar will not let any of his slave girls give attention to men with beards." He looked up at Kurtsev. "You being a married man, it does not matter."

They worked their way through a crowd toward the long corridor that led to the baths. The air was extremely cold until they stepped into the gymnasium, where the heat at once became oppressive. They shed their coats and hats and walked into the dressing rooms where men were exercising with weights, as well as running and wrestling. There were several steam rooms, and from one of them Kurtsev heard the booming voices of Sampson, Hassan, and Paul.

It took only a few moments for Kurtsev and the captain to strip and join the three men. They had managed to keep a room to themselves and it was simple to understand how they had done so. When Kurtsev opened the door, the men inside called out, "Enter, friend, and fight or die!" Seeing their bulging muscles shining with sweat, the captain was impressed and not a little afraid. He started to back away, but Kurtsev laughed and lifted him into the arms of Sampson who threw him to Hassan, who tossed him to Paul. Then they all roared with laughter. The captain had been accepted into a very special group of men and that, he thought, sitting down at last on a folded towel, was good.

An hour later, bathed, massaged, shaved, and dressed in elaborate evening wear, the five men entered the palace ballroom. Huge chandeliers with hundreds of candles cast a warm brilliant glow on the colorful laces and satins, the sparkling gems, and elaborate hairdressings of both the ladies and the men. The ladies coyly hid behind fans, fluttering them in the gentle flattery of candlelight. The fans were trimmed with lace, or carved ivory, and studded with precious gems. Rings flashed on fingers and beauty patches moved in and out of view as the corner of a mouth or an eye or a cheek drew attention, in the best French manner, to the most beautiful point of each lady. The men, in their tight satin breeches and gem-studded buckled shoes, parodied the excessive manner-

isms of the French court; some had already imbibed too freely. Their voices were a little too loud, the kissing of a lady's hand too passionate. Still, the general atmosphere had an elegance, a stylized courtliness Kurtsev had not seen before. What a shame the ladies would not be dining with them, Kurtsev thought, wondering when Russia would become modern enough to allow the women to attend entire state functions, instead of merely being before- and after-dinner diversions.

"Commander, your officers would like you to join them at the end of the room," a corporal said, stepping forward when he spotted the tall redhead.

"Thank you, corporal," Kurtsev said. He looked across the tables, beautifully set with white linen cloths and decorated with the grains and fruits of harvest. He saw a room filled with men in formal military attire, many displaying ribbons and medals, indicating special services.

Kurtsev, his three giants, and the little captain who proudly matched their stride with head held high, followed the corporal across the hall. Dressed in the elaborate clothing of Czar Peter himself, they created quite a stir. The officers could not help but see them approach and, recognizing Kurtsev by his flaming red hair, they came to attention. The orderly introduced each one to Kurtsev and his men. Most of them were high-ranking officers who, when at last they all stood informally about him, wished to conduct a general discussion of the war. They were concerned that the enemy appeared to be successfully throwing his weight against Russia. Having crossed the Dnieper River at Mogilev, the home of some of the officers, Charles was advancing to Smolensk. They discussed the merits of Peter's orders to lay waste to the great plains between there and Moscow so that if Charles pushed on toward the capital he would have to bring supplies with him.

"Not one chicken or one stem of grain has been left," one of the officers said sadly of his homeland.

"The villages in my area have been deserted and burned," another man agreed.

"Peter has already lost this year's harvest. He had to gamble on getting supplies from the south. The wheat you have brought to us has saved the day, my friend," a black-haired and slightly familiar-looking officer with a prominent nose said.

Kurtsev could not quite place the man and the thought nagged at him until a messenger appeared with a note for him and he forgot all about his annoying lapse of memory. The note read, "You are requested to be at the questioning of Count Dolgorsky at 9:00 A.M. tomorrow."

It was signed by the judge who had questioned him in the afternoon. Kurtsev's jaw muscles rippled with the impending strain. He saw that the captain had received a similar note and he called him to one side.

"I would prefer not to attend. We have given our testimony. How do you feel about it?"

"I agree," Minin smiled. "Perhaps we can be on the road to Voronezh by then. We have the czar's orders and that would avoid any further contact with those black-robed buzzards."

"For a little man, you carry a big stick," Kurtsev grinned.

"A small man with a musket or cannon is more dangerous than a big man. He's a smaller target."

They both laughed. Their laughter coincided with a stir of excitement at the main entrance, and the word went around that the ruler would arrive momentarily. When he did, he raised his hands in greeting and took his place at the banquet tables, motioning Kurtsev to join him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you a toast! To an early victory over Charles the Twelfth of Sweden!"

Chairs scraped back over the floor as the men rose to their feet and held their glasses aloft.

The cry, "To victory," echoed through the room.

When everyone was seated, Peter said, "I will leave the speeches for later, we must now eat. But I will say that our situation looks good. Kurtsev, you and your men are to be commended for bringing supplies to us. Now to the feast! Later we can talk, before the tables are cleared and the ladies return to entertain us. The married ones will find their husbands—or someone else."

The czar paused for the laughter to subside. "How many of you have never danced?" he questioned, a devilish gleam in his eyes. "It's time we 'baptized bears' became civilized. I have engaged several dancing masters who will mingle and give us instructions." He looked around at the growing consternation on the faces, gleefully enjoying the distress caused by his

announcement. He had to raise his voice to be heard above the protests. "I have engaged many extra girls for the bachelors among us, and for the men whose wives cannot participate." The protests turned to laughter. "Following the ball, the ladies—and the men who want to leave with them—may do so. Perhaps at that time there will be a *MAN* among you who will accept my challenge."

The czar looked across the table at Hassan, and his eyebrows went up questioningly. The Turk shook his head; one bout with Peter was enough. His hand went across his face to feel the unfamiliar smoothness of his face and Peter laughed and waved his hand.

For the next hour the men ate and drank to the accompaniment of small talk. Kurtsev wanted to talk to Peter about the trial, but the moment never seemed quite right. When they had eaten, the tables were cleared and pushed back against the wall. New cloths were laid over them and bowls of fruit juices with floating ice were set out for the ladies, along with sandwiches spread with every kind of exotic paste.

Peter stood with Kurtsev, watching as the tables were spread. "Catherine's hand is evident here," he said. "She has traveled the western countries with me and picked up many of their customs. This is our first ball. It will be educational for us all." He chuckled, then added, "Ah, here come the ladies." He moved forward to greet his wife.

Kurtsev followed Peter, looking for Katya. He was too late. The music had begun playing and he could see her glide across the polished floor to the far side of the hall, looking up and laughing flirtatiously into the face of her escort. Kurtsev made his way along the side of the big room to see the face of the man with whom she was dancing.

Georgi! The Turkish ambassador's cousin. Impossible!

He was swirling Kurtsev's sister expertly around the dance floor. He seemed intent on Katya's words. Surely he could not be the one she was talking about. He had a wife and children! But did Katya know that—and would Georgi let that stand in his way if he thought himself in love with the girl? Kurtsev knew that many men were unconcerned about the sanctity of marriage. He sat down in a chair beside some elderly people who were watching the dancing, re examining Katya's words.

She had said it was someone from their own town—and Georgi was from Voronezh. Or was that exactly what she had said? She had certainly told him that the man did not yet know she intended to marry him. Was it possible that Katya planned an affair? Was she hoping to separate Georgi from his family?

"Well, commander, I never thought I'd see you sitting on the sidelines. A dance or two would not offend your bride, I am sure."

The voice was the captain's. He laughed at Kurtsev's slightly offended look.

The music stopped.

Katya, clinging to Georgi's arm, came over to Kurtsev, her face flushed with the exercise of the dance. Her brother looked at her radiant smiling face, and could not believe she would be so foolish as to fall in love with someone so ineligible as Georgi.

"Will you dance with me?" Captain Minin asked, a little shyly.

Katya smiled and placed her hand on the captain's arm. As they walked toward the center of the room, she called softly to Kurtsev, "I am saving the next dance for you, brother, but you know, it is customary for the man to ask a lady to dance—even a sister."

Georgi sat down beside Kurtsev and mopped his face and neck with a silk kerchief. "That sister of yours is a lovely girl. She will make some man a fine wife one day."

Kurtsev wanted to probe Georgi's plans for his sister, but watching her laughing with the captain he thought perhaps he had been wrong about Georgi. If so—no, it couldn't possibly be the captain! She did look radiant and excited—and the captain was from Voronezh. He didn't know whether the captain was married or not. "Do you know if Captain Minin is married?" he asked Georgi who looked more than a little surprised at Kurtsev's question.

"Oh, yes," he answered calmly. "He lives at home when he is not on duty. He sent several letters to his wife while we were riding toward Moscow. He is a very devoted husband."

A waiter came by with a tray of drinks and Georgi reached for a glass.

Kurtsev did not.

The floor was filled with people, several of whom had tripped and fallen. It was only with the help of the servants and the dancing masters that the frequent bumping of couple against couple didn't turn the ball into a riot. When the music ended, the captain escorted Katya back to her brother. She took Kurtsev's hand and led him out on to the floor. "This is such unbelievable fun," she laughed. "I loved it when mama taught us to dance, and I always loved dancing with you." He could not help but smile back at his sister's enthusiasm.

"Do you know Georgi very well?" he asked conversationally, trying to sound casual.

Katya leaned back and laughed up at him. "So you think maybe Georgi is the one? What about the captain, brother? Oh, Kurtsev, you are so funny and innocent about women."

Kurtsev's mind went immediately to Esther, and he had an impelling desire to have her in his arms.

Katya was looking across the hall. "The czar is motioning for us to come to him," she said.

Kurtsev turned and acknowledged the request. He held his sister's arm closely and led her to Peter's group where he took Catherine's hand to his lips and bowed formally.

"This red-headed Russian is no awkward bear, my emperor," she laughed, turning to Peter. "How delightful it is to have you with us, commander, and how charming your sister looks."

It is no wonder that she has captivated the czar these many years, thought Kurtsev. He had turned to comment on her beauty to Peter when his eyes were caught by the tall young man he had noticed earlier in his group of officers. He was in the uniform reserved for the czar's staff. A profusion of ribbons and medals gave proof of his battle service.

Suddenly Kurtsev's mind seemed to click, and he felt stunned by his stupidity.

The young man stepped forward. "Yes, commander, I am Esther's cousin Leo. I was very young when we last met, but I remember you well. You were something of a hero to me; I wanted desperately to be tall and strong like you."

Kurtsev reached out and took the young man's hand in his and drew him close in a bear hug, then holding him off, he slapped him on the shoulder.

The czar stood by with his arm across Catherine's shoulders,

beaming as if he were the father of all good happenings. "Yes," he said, "young Leo was recruited into the regular army when he was fourteen, seven years ago. His officers have all been impressed by his conduct and brilliance. He has been my aide for two years now. He and I have studied shipbuilding, gunnery, and the arts of warfare together. We are good friends."

Leo smiled at the czar. The music started and he held out his hand to Katya. She put her hand in his, but before she followed him on to the dance floor she turned to the Peter and said, "We, too, are old friends. Leo and I grew up together." She flashed a radiant smile as she turned to put her hand on Leo's shoulder for the dance. Her eyes went to her brother and she gave him a special smile and a very slight nod of her head, one eyebrow raised for him alone.

Kurtsev relaxed. If Leo was the man of her choice, he was content. How thrilled Esther would be, he thought tenderly, wishing he could tell her the news at once. She did not even know that the young man was alive. He watched the couple dance and saw the manner in which Leo was gazing into Katya's eyes. There was little doubt that he too had made his choice, and that Katya's future happiness was in secure hands.

The following morning was filled with frenzied activity. Kurtsev had to ready his command for departure—fifteen thousand men, wagons and equipment must prepare to move south. Kurtsev was anxious for action, and the sight of his men stirred his blood. It was midmorning when an aide handed him a note. He opened it at once. It read, "The count was put to the torture first by the knout, and then by the rack. He confessed to your charges and was pronounced guilty. He will be sentenced at noon tomorrow. You may be present for the sentencing if you so desire."

The note sobered Kurtsev. The thought of the torture chambers crept into his bones and he could see again the old man hanging in his chains, dying, and the moans of the suffering seemed to stay in his ears.

A hand on his arm broke the morbid spell.

"I, too, received a note," Captain Minin said softly. "Torture is vile, even for a man like Dolgorsky."

The decision to move out before noon of the following day was made without discussion and the two men returned to their work. At the day's end they met again in their quarters. There was to be a farewell supper that night, this one attended by at least one lady, Katya Bolinski.

"The two men in my life are both going into battle, and all I can do is pray for their safety," she said tearfully. "Leo is going to fight with Czar Peter and you, my brother—"

Kurtsev held his tearful sister close, assuring her as confidently as possible that all would be well and he would see her again soon. Then he took her hand and placed it in Leo's as a sign of affection and confidence.

Czar Peter was on hand at noon of the following day to wish his new commander Godspeed. They had revised their plans until the early hours of the morning and there was little left to say. A second force of twenty thousand men would join them at Voronezh and there Kurtsev Bolinski was to defeat Mezeppa, his cossacks, and his Swedish friends. Large supplies of food were leaving Moscow with Kurtsev and there would also be supplies available to them at Voronezh.

Later when the command stopped to break the ice for water, the captain leaned against a supply wagon with Kurtsev. "The sentence for Count Dolgorsky was death."

"How do you know?"

"A messenger from the judge."

He handed Kurtsev one last piece of paper.

Kurtsev read it quickly.

"The suffering he has caused can never be undone, but at least there is one less of his kind," he said. Crumpling the paper, he threw it underfoot and ground it into the snow.

Kurtsev's campaign lasted five months. The czar joined the command during the final days of the campaign, and by May, Charles XII's forces of forty-four thousand men had been reduced to eighteen thousand and the Swedes gave up Poltava. They left behind them two thousand prisoners and over three thousand wounded. The Swedish king escaped with Mezeppa and they found refuge, perhaps near Turkey with the Zaporogs—the cossack pirates.

On the night after the final victory, the czar drank a toast to the Swedish generals who were his prisoners, saying, "I drink to my teachers in the arts of war." To Kurtsev's surprise, he asked if any of them would care to accept a friendly, drinking challenge.

The defeated men, seeing a chance for a slight victory, accepted. They did not understand until later why Hassan roared with laughter and played with his newly grown beard.

The next few hours were given over to relaxation and revelry, during which time the Swedish generals sank one by one into drunken stupors.

Throughout the evening, Peter reviewed the Russian victory. "Commander Bolinski," he shouted, "I order you and your friends to keep a sharp lookout for Mezeppa, the traitor, on your return to Moscow. The Swedish ruler is too young for rye and is still on lamb's milk. He has run away and left his men to their fate like a scared boy; besides, he got shot in the foot and has to be carried around on his bed, but I wish to mount the head of Mezeppa on my spear."

Later, when Kurtsev and his men were resting on blankets beside the wall of the old church building that was being used as headquarters, Peter told Kurtsev to hold his command until he reached Azov. "You will have twelve thousand dragoons and six thousand cavalymen to accompany you. I believe that the cossacks will be loyal to me now that Mezeppa has fled. If not, you can crush them once and for all."

Having shaken the hands of all of the men around him, the czar addressed Kurtsev one more time, "Commander, Russia will always be grateful to you and to your men for your services. I hope to build a land of peace, not of war—a land of safety and plenty where all men—Turks, Greeks, Russians, and Jews—can live together in peace." He tossed a small chamois bag of gold coins into Kurtsev's hands. "This should see you safely home to your bride, my friend," he laughed. He turned on his heel and was soon out of sight.

"Already he is known as Peter the Great, and I can see why," Kurtsev said aloud. He stretched wearily and thought how good it was to have an end to war.

The march to Azov was through the spring mud. It was a constant challenge to maintain a forward movement; the

supply wagons became mired, the loads frequently had to be shifted and repairs were constantly necessary. It seemed to Kurtsev that the battle with the cossacks had been a preliminary to the challenge of getting his troops back to Azov.

By the time Kurtsev was relieved of his command, he was utterly exhausted, but not too much so to arrange immediate passage to Amsterdam on the first Dutch East India ship that sailed into port.

Chapter Seventeen

The ship sailed at daybreak with Kurtsev, Sampson, Paul, and Hassan on board. They stood at the rail and watched until they could no longer see Captain Minin who had been at the dock to say his farewells. It was a sad parting. The five men had become good friends and, despite all the good intentions in the world, no one could predict when and if they would meet again.

Kurtsev's last act on Russian soil had been to split the czar's gift of gold and to swear to return to Voronezh to rebuild his family home, but his words had not really relieved the sadness of his parting with the little captain.

Once the dock was out of sight, the two Greeks and Hassan lost no time gambling with the crew. They will not be content until their money is gone, Kurtsev decided, chuckling. He made his way to the bridge to speak to Captain Vard Bogaard. Within a few minutes he found himself offering to take regular turns at the wheel watch. Though he had spent most of his life on land, he had studied navigation, and he had learned from Menasseh. With the prospect of being part of the Dutch East

India Company, he would be spending much of his life at sea, and he felt it behooved him to learn all he could. He stood at the wheel, looking up into the clear blue sky and watching the sails billow in the brisk breeze. He let his thoughts soar to Esther, a luxury he had not often allowed himself during the past months. Now that he was on his way home to her, he felt that he could indulge in memories, and hopes, and plans. He allowed himself the full anticipation and enjoyment of thinking of her.

The ship hugged the northern shores of the sea, seeking out the best winds as it approached the narrow channel of the Bosphorus and the deep waters of the Black Sea. The crew was called from their bunks, and men scampered like monkeys to reduce the sails and slow the vessel.

Captain Bogaard, relieving Kurtsev at the wheel, said, "Two things bother us right here. To begin with the waters are sometimes very tricky. We have to slow down to negotiate the straits. That leads to the second problem: land pirates—Zaporogs. We are armed and trained to resist them, but vessels have been stolen here, all their cargo removed, and the ships sailed out into the sea, aflame and sinking."

Kurtsev went below to rouse his men from their bunks. "Bring your weapons, there could be trouble. We know Mezeppa fled to the Zaporogs. He is desperate and will need supplies. And what better way to get them than to steal them at sea." He picked up his pistol and sword which matched those of his three companions; he had gone to a smithy in Moscow and had four made alike for his friends and himself.

When he reached the deck, he heard a shout.

"We are boarded! Zaporogs to starboard!"

The Zaporogs were the wildest of all the cossacks. They owed loyalty to no one, lived on an island fortress, and were beyond the reach of both the Russian soldiers and the Turkish Sultan's Janissaries.

Kurtsev had barely reached the deck when a huge bald-headed cossack with a thick drooping mustache raised his sword above the captain's head. Keeping his one hand on the wheel, the captain lifted his other arm to protect himself just as a shot from Kurtsev's pistol darkened the spot between the Cossack's wide-set eyes.

The impact of the shot hurled him over backwards into the sea.

Suddenly the cossacks came in a howling mob over the sides. Some wore fur caps and warm coats, other were bare-waisted, their heads shaved except for a small braided strand of hair that hung over their faces. Each man wore what best suited his fancy.

One of the cossacks shouted above the howls of the others and held the head of a sailor above his head. There was hoarse laughter as the blood dripped into his face and the rest of them moved, yelling, into the heart of the ship. Kurtsev heard his name shouted and he swung around to see the grinning faces of his own men, each brandishing a pistol and a sword.

Together the four of them leaped toward the mob. Their guns spit out flashes of fire and four of the cossacks were down; their blades flashed in the light of the stars as they turned to meet the rush as the crew fired on them from behind. Their forward rush was stopped by the fury of four big men with swords that fell like weighted battle-axes among them. The Zaporogs hesitated. Kurtsev and his men stepped over the fallen cossacks to reach further into their midst and the survivors turned and fled to the rails as a man.

The captain was still at the helm shouting orders to his crewmen for more sail when Kurtsev reached him. His son, Hans, who was at his father's side, stepped forward to Kurtsev and said excitedly, "I was coming up the steps when I saw the sword raised above my father's head. I screamed a warning to him, but I was sure nothing could save him. The blade started its descent and suddenly it was as if a giant hand jerked the cossack over backwards into the sea. I saw the pistol in your hand. It was your bullet that saved my father's life."

He reached out his hand to grip Kurtsev's, and though he was only a boy, his grip was that of a man.

"I too am grateful, not only for myself, but for my crew and ship. The seaman on watch should have given us more warning; his life has been forfeited as a result of his carelessness," responded Captain Vard.

Before Kurtsev could answer, the first mate came to report. "Captain, four men were killed, and five were wounded, one seriously. The decks have been cleared of the enemy dead."

He looked soberly at the captain and then at Kurtsev. "Sir, I would like to say that without your help and that of your men we would have lost our ship and our lives."

The mate returned to his duties and the two men and the boy stood on the deck as the captain guided the ship into the darker waters of the Black Sea. Their eyes searched the dark distant outline of water against the sky far ahead and the brief violent encounter faded into the past like a bad dream as the bow of the ship dipped serenely into the water.

It was high noon when the ship was guided into the Golden Horn. Turkish war ships were on guard, but the harbor was alive with shipping and each ship had to await clearance before entering port. It was late afternoon before the captain relayed his orders through the mate, and there was a cheer as the ship berthed and the gangway was set in place. The sultan's servants were on hand with slaves, carts and wagons to carry off the ship's cargo—cloths and silks from the Far East which were anxiously awaited and highly prized by the ladies of the sultan's harem.

Kurtsev and his three friends descended to the wharf. They went to a cafe and drank a parting cup of thick, strong Turkish coffee, but they did not stay long because the sultan had relaxed his orders against smoking and, between the smoke and heat, the place was oppressive. Hassan was ready to depart for his home. He gave each man a strong handshake, leaving Kurtsev for last, although Sampson and Paul, too, were like brothers to him. Kurtsev pressed a small bag of gold coins into the wrestler's hand and when Hassan began to protest, the Russian forestalled his objections, declaring the gold to be "the spoils of war."

"Go with God, and may you find your dreams," Kurtsev said, watching Hassan's shaved head bobbing above the crowd as he moved away. Then, signaling a carriage, he and his two friends made for the Greek village where they would spend the next two days. Half a year had passed since they had been in Istanbul, and their friends asked many eager questions about their travels.

"Are you going to have another fight? Our money is gone and we would like to win some more," one lad said to Kurtsev.

Sampson picked the boy up and tossed him above his head to

Paul who whirled him about before he set him on his feet. Paul felt the boy's muscles and turned to Sampson in mock seriousness. "This boy will soon be ready to wrestle with you and win his family much money."

The boy looked up into Kurtsev's face and shook his head doubtfully. "Maybe when I am big he will be so old that I can beat him."

During the next two days there were parties and feasting, games and sports and visiting. After another farewell, Kurtsev found himself on board ship again, looking back to the fabled city of Istanbul, wondering whether he would ever see it again.

The ship came alive with men busy at their tasks. This trip would be a brief one, as would be their stop. It was, however, Paul's home. The breeze was brisk and all sails were filled; they would be in port by sundown. Paul and Sampson joined Kurtsev at the rail to look at the distant snowy white clouds that hung over the far horizon. Kurtsev looked at the two dark and bearded men, and thought about the day he met them, fierce and inhospitable astride Menasseh ben Yakov's big horses. Now they were his most trusted and proven friends.

"The captain says that the ship will only be in port for a few hours, so I may not get a chance to talk to you again. Remember, a word from you at any time, and I will come to your side. The strength of my arms is yours," Paul told Kurtsev. The two men gripped each other's hands and Paul turned to gaze at the thin dark line on the horizon that was all he could yet see of his home. Seagulls wheeled overhead, their screams accompanied the mate's barking orders. The colors of the Dutch East India Company snapped aloft at the captain's order, and the ship was cleared to enter the port.

The ship gently berthed. As the lines were tossed from the vessel to secure it to pilings, Kurtsev watched beads of sweat form on Paul's forehead; after an absence of several years, his excitement at being this close to home was almost intolerable. His eyes were searching the crowd for signs of his family, but it was Sampson, standing alongside loaded with gear, who directed his friend's eyes until he recognized his oldest daughter. She was waving, and there was a young man near with her, his arm around her waist, holding a baby in his arms.

"By the gods, it looks like our friend here is a grandfather,"

Sampson grinned. "Paul, your Helene has picked a fine-looking man."

The girl was waving vigorously to them. The three of them moved onto the dock in her direction and she left her companion and ran into her father's arms. Tears streamed down their faces as they held each other tightly and murmured words of love and greeting.

"Uncle Sampson, how wonderful you look," she said finally, kissing her father's friend on each of his weathered cheeks. The young man came forward, and Helene, still holding her father's hand, said, "Father I want you to meet my husband Nicki and our little son Paul." She deposited the baby into Paul's arms. "And this is your long-lost grandfather, my pet. It's time you got acquainted." She laughed delightedly when the baby reached up and grabbed a small fistful of whiskers to pull himself up. "He is named for you, father."

Paul was extremely pleased, but kept looking through the crowd. At last he said, "Helene, where is your mother?" His eyes had a sort of pleading.

Helen went quiet. "Father, I need to talk to you alone."

"You and your husband are my family, and these two are my friends, my brothers. Is she sick? Or dead?"

The girl's eyes brimmed with tears. "No she's neither sick nor dead. But she thought *you* were. She knew that you had been captured with the others, and then we heard no more except that many captives had been killed and most of the others sold as slaves. She—she married again, father. She has a new baby. She will talk to you—if you insist—but first I wanted to explain. Since the message came that you were safe and were coming home, we have all been under tremendous emotional stress—mama most of all. Her husband has given her a good home—we were all virtually starving until he came and took care of us after you were gone."

She covered her face with her hands, but the tears ran through her fingers.

Paul was stunned. Apparently his messages had never reached his family. His mouth twisted bitterly, but his arm went around his daughter. "What does your mother wish to do, Helene?" His voice was low and soft. "Would it be better if I left and never returned?"

"No, you must see her, talk with her. We all love you, papa." She put her arms around her father and sobbed on his shoulder. "You are to come to our house, Nicki's and mine, and stay with us until a decision is made." The baby, no longer satisfied, was sucking his finger. He was hungry and started to cry.

"We must go now, papa," Helene said. "Bring your friends with you. They are welcome in our home."

"I will come, but only for a day or two. Your Uncle Sampson will come with me. Kurtsev is on his way to Amsterdam to join his wife. His ship sails in a few hours."

Kurtsev shook hands with the girl's husband, then took Helene's young hand in his. It was like Esther's, small and firm. There was nothing he could say to Paul, so he just gripped his shoulder with a comforting and understanding hand. Turning to Sampson he said, "I look forward to seeing you this autumn in Holland." He glanced first at Paul and back to the other man. "And we also have room for—" Sampson understood and nodded.

The group waited until the Russian was back on board before they left. He walked along the deck rail, watching them disappear toward the main street of the town, and felt heartsick for Paul.

Turning away, he decided to report to the captain immediately. Hard work would surely make him forget his concerns and anticipations.

During the next few weeks Kurtsev put in many long hours of manual labor. He repaired sails, spliced rope, loaded and unloaded cargo. When he should have been resting he poured over charts with the captain's young son, Hans. His appetite for knowledge of the sea was inexhaustible. He listened to the sailors' tales of faraway places and experiences with natives in foreign waters. No task was too menial for him, no problem too small for his consideration. He accepted any challenge of strength or skill with good humor, and the men aboard came to know and admire his good-natured acceptance of their ribald challenges. He learned to draw an anchor single-handed from the sea, lift a keg of rum over his head, and he could soon plot a course as well as the captain.

The hours passed more swiftly for him if he was busy, and so

it felt as though he was hurrying faster to Esther as he worked. When he had no more work he studied maps and asked questions about navigation until he could no longer hold up his head with weariness. Only then did his memories of Esther cause him to anticipate the reunion ahead. Their honeymoon, cut short by Menasseh's summons, would at last be resumed.

Kurtsev's mind went to their first hours on the island, and he resolved to take her to some secluded place where they could swim and walk and get acquainted again. A soft bed with her in his arms, and their bodily passions given full fulfillment was no small part of his thoughts, especially during the last days of their journey. As the ship approached the coast of France, and then England, the distraction of work was no longer enough. The channel lay under a heavy fog and they were forced to move slowly and with extreme caution. Men were assigned on never-ending watch duty. Ships could not be seen until almost too late and the sound of horns and bells became constant.

Finally the ship's captain was left with no choice but to lower the anchor and wait until the fog lifted. "We are within a few knots of home, but I cannot further risk the ship," he told Kurtsev. "I know our position within a few feet, but I do not know of other ships' movements. I would venture a guess that few vessels will be moving until this lifts, but we had best stay here. That way we are all safer."

"How long could we be caught here?"

"Hopefully a day or two at the most—it could be only a matter of hours."

"Is it possible for a longboat to make it to shore?"

"Yes. Some of the crew have done that before."

Seeing the determination on Kurtsev's face, the captain ordered the mate to prepare a boat.

"You will need seven sailors to man it. Have them report within twenty minutes."

More than enough eager volunteers soon appeared. Within half an hour the longboat was lowered, ropes and pulleys screaming, and almost as quickly as it settled into the water, it was enveloped by the fog. A lantern hung on a short mast pole. It waved back and forth as the boat rose and fell with the swells of the sea. The oarsmen settled into their places and the boatswain, who held rudder and compass, called the time. The

men matched the movement of their oars to his rhythm and the slapping of the bow hitting the water, the oars squealing in their locks, and the boatswain's voice, bounced off the fog and filled the night.

At first it was as if they were rowing into a void. One man broke the monotony with a joke, and though the others laughed, it was nervous merriment. When they knew they were nearing the shore, all movement stopped. The longboat rocked silently as the men listened for the sound of the buoys and searched for a light blurring through the fog.

They saw nothing.

Taking up the oars again, they moved on slowly through the water until suddenly the faint outline of the pilings supporting the wharf could be seen ahead.

The boat was secured and it surprised no one that Kurtsev Bolinski was the first up the ladder that led to the dock. In his impatience, he stumbled, and a roar of laughter went up from the sailors.

It was gentle laughter for they, like Kurtsev, had been away from their homes too long.

Chapter Eighteen

Esther, hanging up her wash, breathed deeply of the channel breeze. After several days of rain and fog the breeze brought with it the sweet smell of salt marshes. She had been in Amsterdam for seven months, and still there was no word from Kurtsev. Menasseh had settled her comfortably in a small cottage which nestled at the back of their garden and she was reasonably content.

"Aunt Esther, is your husband and my friend Kurtsev on that ship?" William ben Yakov asked, shielding his eyes to watch a tall-masted sailing vessel that barely came into view now that the fog had lifted.

Esther, as always, studied the ship on the horizon, then closed her eyes to concentrate. "No, not on this one, William," she smiled.

"Tell me again how Uncle Kurtsev fought the great Turk," the child asked, and as she had done so many times before, Esther told him the story. William had become her constant companion since the doctors of the village had operated on his foot and she had taken it upon herself to massage it to ease the pain.

This day she turned away from the sight of the ships coming into harbor. Somehow the waiting was becoming unreal, and she felt very weary. She took William by the hand and slowly walked him home.

Anna waved to Esther from the kitchen window. She looks so wan and—defeated, she thought. Surely Kurtsev could have gotten some word to her in all that time.

It was comforting for Esther to have Anna near—almost like having her own mother around. The long trip from Istanbul to the land of windmills, tulips, and breezes had been filled with worry about Kurtsev. Also, then and later, she had suffered with what Anna called morning sickness.

Esther shooed William into his house and walked slowly back to her own, but she did not go inside. Instead she stood in the tall grass and let the breeze fill her skirts and her nostrils with the soft fresh smell of spring. She went to the fallen log where she had sat for countless hours, watching the sailing vessels and dreaming of her husband, glad that the waters were clear for the ships to come safely into the harbor. She pulled her shawl up over her shoulders against the still cool day and was about to rise and walk up the path when, on the far horizon, she saw silhouetted against the skies the masts of a great ship. She felt a quickening of her heart which soon passed, but the memory of it lingered as she watched the vessel move into the harbor. Somehow she knew that very soon Kurtsev would be home.

That night the fog returned, and with it Esther's restlessness. Something told her that her husband was out there, trying to reach her, and she did not have the patience to sit or sleep. Finally, when it was much too late for her to be out, she could stand the loneliness no longer. She wrapped herself up in a shawl and walked on the dunes. Even that was not enough and she began to run. Laboring to reach the top, a cramp caught at her and she went to her knees in the dune grass. She pressed her hand against her bulging stomach to ease the pain, sorry she had ignored Anna's warning to be careful now that she was well into her pregnancy.

Just as Esther was struggling to get to her feet, Bernardo appeared as if out of nowhere, his young face concerned.

"I'm fine." She laughed to calm her fears, as they walked together. "But I am glad to see you."

"Mama sent me to get you. When I couldn't find you in your house, I guessed you were here. Anyway, papa and mama want you with us tonight. And I warn you, they will try to make you eat. Mama says you don't eat enough to keep a bird alive."

The ben Yakov family had gathered in the kitchen for a late-night snack, eating and talking happily. "Another big ship appeared on the skyline at dusk two days ago, before the fog came down again. I was so sure Kurtsev was on it," Esther said.

"One of our ships is about due," Menasseh smiled. "He could very well be on it, but I have received no word."

Anna stepped forward, her hands on her hips. "My husband, women don't need written messages to know a loved one is near. They know it here." She thumped her breast.

"My dear wife," Menasseh began. He held up his hand and, with a big smile that showed his white teeth between his mustache and his beard, said, "I know from many years of experience with you that I would be wise to trust your intuition before anything else. We should know tomorrow if your Kurtsev is on board the ship."

"Is it possible for me to wait for him at the docks?"

"No!" Anna and Menasseh said, in unison.

"Be out all night? My dear, be reasonable! Go to bed so that you will be beautiful and rested in the morning. I promise you I will go to the port at first light. If your intuition is right and our ship—carrying Kurtsev—is in, I will be there to greet him," Menasseh said firmly. "Come. I will walk with you to your door."

Esther lay on her bed, fully dressed. She pulled a light quilt up over her knees and tucked several pillows under her head so that she could look out of the open window at the dark sky, as if she could see the tops of any masts that might sail through the night. The leaves on the trees rustled gently in the channel breeze and stars peeked through the moving clouds. She could hear the mournful sound of the foghorn mounted on the lighthouse, and it gave her comfort as she lay there, her mind going through the motions of getting up, putting on warm

clothes, and walking the two miles to the docks. She squirmed for greater comfort against the pillows, and put her hand on her distended belly. It is not so easy to find comfort with you inside there, she thought lovingly, looking down at her distorted body. A tear gathered at the corner of her eyes, and she impatiently wiped it away. For a moment she regretted her shape, afraid Kurtsev would not find her as pretty as before.

Suddenly she threw off the covering and slid her feet into the klompens at the side of her bed. She could not sleep, and she felt restless and driven to action. Her mind told her to relax and get some rest, but her heart sounded loudest in her ears. She put on her coat and scarf and hurried out into the night, not slowing her pace until she felt another cramp begin. When a second pain came, she rested against a post at the side of the road until she was relaxed again and this time she moved on slowly, making frequent stops along the way. The fog was thick. It frightened her, but not enough to turn back.

A watchman's lamp burned in the window of the small shed set upon the docks. The light could barely be seen until Esther was upon it, and she could not make out the ships secured along the docks. Her klompens sounded hollowly against the boards of the dock, the watchman's dog barked, and soon his door opened.

"Oh, it is you again, young lady," the burly man said, coming forward with a lantern in his hand. "This is too late and the fog is too heavy for you to be here. You should be in your bed. Is there something wrong?"

His baggy pants were tied at the ankles to keep the cold breezes from his legs, and his klompens showed much wear. He wore a heavy wool coat, and the smell of his pipe hung fragrantly about him. He had removed his hat at the sight of her, and his silver hair caught the lamplight.

"No, there is nothing wrong, Ansel. I was just so restless—and I was hoping my husband might come home tonight."

"Come in where it is warm; the fog hurts my bones," the old man said, concerned for the girl.

Esther went into the small room and pulled a chair close to the stove. The warmth felt good, she thought, as she stooped to pat the dog.

"There will be no ships in tonight, child. With this fog

coming in, there will not likely be any before noon tomorrow. Can I walk you home? You'd best be in your bed."

"There are longboats. He could row some of the way, couldn't he? I'm sure Kurtsev would not wait if he were close enough for rowing. Don't you think?"

"Now child, you'd best be sensible. Seamen who have spent many weeks on the high seas would do the sensible thing when they get this close to home port and wait for morning. Come, I'll walk at least part of the way with you."

"That won't be necessary. I am rested now, and I will be just fine if I walk slowly."

Reluctantly, Esther started down the path toward her home. The watchman's dog tried to follow her, but she pushed him toward the shack, called out a second goodnight and turned away alone. On impulse she forsook the path and went toward the sea. It seemed to her that the fog covered the whole world. It rolled around her feet so thickly that she could no longer see her shoes, and suddenly she felt fear. She began to run, stumbling on the stones that were scattered on the path and tripping over her awkward wooden shoes. She had stopped and was trying to regain a sense of direction when the cramps started again and she sat down on the grass. Her exploring hands told her she was in a field and, crawling along on her hands and knees, she made her way around some brush until she found a small depression in the ground. It seemed to give her a measure of protection against the cold breeze being carried inland on the fog, so she doubled up, with her coat pulled tight around her, and tried to forget her sense of panic.

The cramps eased off and Esther made an instant decision. She felt fairly comfortable and warm. It would be intelligent to wait until the fog lifted to walk home; it was not as if she had never spent a night out in the open before. She chuckled—a little hysterically—as she remembered that the last time she had been without clothes, curled up and, despite everything, fell asleep.

The other men from the longboat, still laughing, joined Kurtsev on the dock. It had taken two men to match the redhead's strength at the oars, what with his eagerness to reach port.

"He's not seen his bride for seven months," one of the men said.

A dog barked in a shed close by. Kurtsev turned to see an old man, holding aloft a lantern and presenting an eerie picture in the swirling fog.

As Kurtsev strode toward him, the watchman thought surely he was dreaming. The giant coming out of the fog seemed, to Ansel's five-foot-four inches, to be of nightmare proportions. "I am Kurtsev Bolinski, and I hope that you can give me directions to the home of my wife—or at least to the home of Menasseh ben Yakov."

"Your wife will more likely be in town than anywhere else," one of the sailors said, emerging out of the fog. "Why don't you come with us."

"Your wife lives in the other direction. You will have no trouble finding your way—if you can stay on the path," Ansel said. "You did say your name was . . ."

"... Kurtsev Bolinski . . ."

"Sir, your wife left here just a little while ago. I sent her home not ten minutes ago."

"In this fog?" Kurtsev shouted.

"She has been here so often, she could likely walk that path blindfolded," Ansel cackled. "I think perhaps I had better come with you, and my dog too," he added, as an afterthought. "You do not know the way and I am bored here alone."

Kurtsev said a brief farewell to the sailors and followed the old man's lantern into the mist. They had only gone a short distance when they made out several lanterns bobbing up and down and moving toward them. Because of the fog it looked for all the world as if the lanterns were self-propelled. Ansel raised his own in signal and shouted, "hello."

A moment later Menasseh and Anna emerged out of the fog and Kurtsev was being smothered in Anna's embrace.

"We are searching for Esther," Menasseh said, without further preliminaries, having gripped Kurtsev's hand in a warm greeting. "She was not too well this evening, and Anna decided we should check on her. We found her bed empty. She was sure you were coming in tonight and wanted to come to the dock—" Menasseh's voice trailed off.

"And you did not see her on your way here?"

"No. She has obviously strayed from the path in the fog."

"We must find her," Anna said quietly.

"What is the matter with her?" Kurtsev asked.

Anna did not answer and Menasseh responded by stepping out into the fog and calling her name.

"Let us spread out and keep calling. But be careful that you do not fall into the surf," Ansel said, feeling guilty that he had not insisted upon walking Esther home.

Anna's hand went to her throat at Ansel's implication. In the fogbound silence the barking of a dog could be heard—sharp and somehow demanding.

Kurtsev disappeared in the direction of the bark, with the others following fast on his heels.

"Esther! Esther!"

The young woman, glad of the dog's companionship could dimly hear fog-muffled voices.

"Who is it? I am here!" she called out. Her voice came out in a croak. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Here! I am here!" She began to get awkwardly to her feet when a huge dark shape materialized before her.

"Esther?"

Kurtsev gathered her in his arms with a swoop and strode off into the fog to meet Menasseh and Anna halfway, holding her close and covering her face and neck with kisses.

"Are you all right Esther? You didn't fall or have more cramps?" Anna demanded insistently.

"I'm fine. Especially now that Kurtsev is here," Esther said, nuzzling her nose against his throat.

"When we get to the house, you will tell me what is wrong with you, my independent little wife," Kurtsev said, laughing exultantly. Now that he had her in his arms, what could be so wrong that couldn't be righted.

"Yes, my husband, you will see when we get to the house."

The old man, Ansel, walked beside Menasseh with his lantern. "This Russian who is the young woman's husband, cannot be a Jew," he said, pointing to Kurtsev's red hair. "I do not understand. Is he of your family?"

"Yes," Menasseh said softly, "he is of our family."

The old man still did not understand, but something in

Menasseh ben Yakov's voice made him smile and feel a twinge of envy as he turned back toward the dock.

Kurtsev laid Esther down upon the bed and he could see that his wife was indeed with child—child! He felt a feeling of exultation, and then a soft moan from Esther turned his thoughts to anxiety and humbleness. He dropped to his knees beside her bed and took her hand in his. She gripped hard for long moments as beads of sweat appeared on her brow and nose. At last her grip relaxed and she looked tenderly at him.

"I am so glad that you have returned in time for the birth of our son."

Kurtsev laid his head humbly on her arm, and the first tears filled his eyes since the time he had brought Esther to safety from Voronezh.

Anna's hand came down on Kurtsev's shoulder, "It would be best for you to join the men in the other room while we women get down to our work."

He nodded his head and then gently kissed Esther's lips. As he went to the door, he turned back to Anna, "I would like to stay at the birthing . . ."

"This is women's work, Kurtsev. Go now, and we shall soon bring your child to you," she answered quietly.

It took seven long hours before that door was again opened. Kurtsev tried to concentrate on giving his report and learn of the business before him. When he heard Esther's small cries of pain, his head lifted and he half rose, but Menasseh's big hand held him steady. "The first child is always the longest and the hardest, my son. Have patience—and pray."

At last the door opened and Anna came into the room holding a small red-faced baby and placed it in Kurtsev's arms. "This is your son—at last," she said tiredly and yet triumphantly.

Kurtsev looked down at the small wriggling being—his son—*his son*. He turned to Anna. "*Esther?*" he asked.

"You can come to her in a few minutes after we have prepared the bed. She will want to see you."

Menasseh, Sampson, and the older boys crowded around Kurtsev in the early morning light. They all wanted to see the

newborn infant. Menasseh's big voice rose above that of the now squawling baby, his voice jubilant. "He's got red hair like you, boy. You've got yourself a Scot."

Anna's voice at the doorway spoke softly, "Bring your son to his mother, Kurtsev."

The Russian turned eagerly to the door, and Anna softly closed the door after him. He moved over to the bed, quite awkwardly, holding his crying son and looked down at Esther. He knelt down beside the bed as she gazed at him with trembling pale lips.

"I have given you your son, my dearest. Does he please you?"

"As you do, my little one. Oh Esther—" He swallowed and then added, "He certainly has lusty lungs!"

Kurtsev laid the baby beside his wife and watched with great tenderness as the baby began to suckle at the full breast of his little bride. Tenderly he watched until the child was asleep, and then he carefully placed him in the cradle beside the bed.

He sat back in an old rocking chair and just looked at his family as Esther slept. He stretched luxuriously, for he was tired, and yet he was too exultant for sleep.

With his hands behind his head he looked through the big window at the end of the room where he could see the branches of the trees weaving gently in the channel breezes. It was good to be home—and what a homecoming! He laughed softly.

Esther stirred in her sleep, and he reached gently to take her hand in his. What a satisfying woman was his Jewish bride. He looked at the baby in its cradle beside his foot. The infant made a small mewling sound, and Kurtsev reached out his finger to touch the small hand. It curled around his and held tight. His mouth broke into a wide grin. A boy—his son! He felt great satisfaction.

His mind was no longer tired, for it was full of plans for his son.

Esther stirred for a moment, then settled back into sleep. Kurtsev gently smoothed back the hair from her forehead. How soft and silky it felt to his hand. He reached over with soft lips and kissed the top of her head. He settled back and began again to dream of the future—with his wife—and his son!

Book Two

SWORD ON THE AMAZON



Chapter Nineteen

Scott Alexandr Bolinski raised his grandfather's ancient sword in a final farewell to his family, who were fading into mere dots as his ship left the distant Dutch shoreline. He walked forward, eagerly adjusting his stride to the roll of the ship, for he was an experienced seaman. He gazed at the fading figures of his parents and could see his father gather his tearful mother close to his side. Though he was eager for this venture, there was a knot in his throat and it was hard to swallow. It would be many months before he saw them again.

His gait adjusted easily to the roll for the winds were tricky, left unsettled by yesterday's rain, and he heard the snap of the sails as they were let out and then filled with the brisk breeze, putting a strain on the creaking ropes.

With his sword still unsheathed, Scott stood at the bow and looked across the turbulent seas. For a long moment he did not move a muscle nor did his eyelashes flicker in the wind and the spray. His face might have been carved from granite, and he appeared as formidable and strong as his ancestors who had tamed the lands of Russia and sailed the uncharted seas.

Now he breathed deeply of the tangy salt air and his chest expanded as he felt the tingling of his well-conditioned muscles. He searched the seas with his light blue eyes. Though it was yet too close to Holland, the words of his father echoed in his thoughts, "Keep a sharp lookout for pirates, my son. They can only capture the unwary."

Scott's big fist took a tighter grip on the six-foot blade in his hand. It had tasted blood before, first in the hand of his grandfather against the nomadic Kalmuks and Bashkirs, then his father's arm had used it against the traitorous Count Mikhail Dolgorsky in defending his friend, Czar Peter the Great.

His big six-foot-six frame moved easily as he slashed the great sword back and forth. Perhaps it would taste blood in his own hands during the journey ahead.

Captain Hans Bogaart gave an order to the first mate William ben Yakov, Scott's friend and neighbor, and young Bolinski sheathed his blade and turned to help. As second mate he had his own duties to perform on the *Nina Marie* as the efficient Dutch crew took her out on the tide.

Scott's legs easily adjusted to the roll of the ship as it moved out toward the Baltic and then to the great Atlantic seas beyond. He wanted to shout out his joy for he was young and this was his first assignment for the great Dutch East India Company. In addition, Captain Bogaart had consented to teach him advanced seamanship.

Though this trip was a routine one, every voyage was dangerous. Pirates still roamed the seas as a constant threat, though certainly none of them could catch this swift Dutch ship. Scott glanced at the two cannons that could lob three-hundred-pound loads a mile and a half, and he noticed that Jens Anders was stooped before one, apparently giving stern instructions to one of his gunners. No pirate would dare venture close, for Jens was the most famous gunner on the high seas. This would be a simple voyage to Recife, Brazil, then over to the West Indies, and then home again. Besides, if there had been any danger Father would have sent Sampson along. Scott thought briefly again of his father's last advice, *Never be unguarded, my son. Men who relax are the ones who die.*

Scott cast the dampening thought from his mind, for now his feet were beginning to feel the great Atlantic rollers under his feet, and it was as though they were taking wing with the exuberance of the adventure ahead.

Young Bolinski tossed his cap expertly at the hook, and then hung his well-fitted braided coat on a small hanger in the closet. Eagerly, his muscular arms pulled the hand-knitted sweater down over his flame-colored hair, then stretched it taut over his massive chest, cinched the belt tighter, and turned eagerly to the wheelhouse where the captain and the first mate were poring over maps laid before them. Under the captain's directions, Scott enthusiastically helped plan the ship's route.

In the weeks that followed, the course of the voyage led them through the English Channel and then down the coast to Lisbon. Several days out of the great Portuguese port, they touched at Madeira, and then sailed onward toward the Canary Islands.

Due east of Africa and three weeks out of the Canaries, the winds began to rise with resultant high seas that tossed the ship around the ocean like a toy. When the shouted command came to "furl the royal!" the sailors skinned aloft through drenching icy rain to obey.

Jens Anders skidded across the slippery deck that was awash with icy green seawater. Slowly he made his way to the galley. As he slammed the door against the wind and rain, Chen Wong placed a cup of steaming black coffee on the table before him.

Chen Wong had been at sea for many years as cook, but now as he cleared the table, throwing the tin cups into his wash bucket, he looked apprehensively through the small portholes at the ominous swells and the smashing waves. He was thinking that he would have to tell the captain that due to the heat and moisture of the last weeks near Africa, the biscuits, flour and grain were full of vermin. Lately he had kept the lanterns low so that the men could not easily see what they were eating. He shuffled about the galley preparing the evening meal, muttering and staring wide-eyed as the ship's lantern swung violently back and forth above his head.

The galley door slammed open again to let in a drenching

gust of wind and water, causing Chen to grab wildly for the sliding coffee pot on the galley stove.

"Shut door! Shut door!" Chen yelled wildly as he reached unsuccessfully to stop a sliding pot from falling from the galley shelf above him.

The laughter of the huge bronzed man who entered boomed joyously around the small confined space as he steadied himself with one hand on the beam above his head. Then Scott Alexandr Bolinski slid easily into a chair before the table. One big hand reached for a tin cup of coffee while the other went over his wet mahogany-red hair to the thin leather thong that held his thick clubbed hair at the nape of his neck. He was attempting both to smooth the curling tendrils from his temples and also to wipe away the excess of rain and seawater that hung like iridescent globules and dripped down his neck.

"Whew, Chen, it's building to a hurricane, it's cold—brrrr!"

He swung as the door opened again to admit the square bulk of the captain, Hans Bogaart, who sank into his comfortable chair at the head of the bolted-down table. He was closely followed by the first mate.

"It looks like a bad one, captain," Jens said, joining the group.

"Who can predict God's weather? He makes his own," the captain answered stolidly. He was a ponderous man in both size and thought.

The gunner's voice was insistent. "Well, there's fish playing on the surface of the water, the sky is aflame as the sun sets, and the swells are increasing by the hour. Those are hurricane signs."

Bogaart stared coldly at Jens and found it difficult to accept anyone who pursued a subject after he had already closed it. "It is the wrong time of year for hurricanes. However the seas *are* acting up a bit. Perhaps by morning it will have blown over." He took a long breath and then asked calmly, "Mr. Anders, is our powder staying dry?" His voice was cool.

Jens had been with the captain on previous voyages, and he knew that he had now annoyed the man. "I think so, sir, but I'll go make another check." He answered civilly, attempting conciliation.

"You do that, sir, and be sure to watch your lantern. I'll have no carelessness aboard my ship—especially around that gunpowder." He looked sternly at Jens from under his bushy brows.

"Yes, captain!" Jens touched his forefinger to the bill of his cap, then opened the door, spraying in water from the huge white-capped waves. Bolinski jumped up to slam the door shut after him. Before he sat back down, the captain ordered, "Scott, you'd best check our goods. This storm will increase before it subsides, and a shift of cargo could be disastrous."

Scott's eyebrows rose with surprise, and he listened to the creaking of the ship's timbers and the scream of the wind, then grinned and nodded his head. After all it was a captain's prerogative to be positive—right or wrong—and Bogaart knew the score very well. He opened the door and stepped out into the passageway then pulled the door shut with a great bang, for it took a great deal of strength to close it against the wind.

As Scott moved onto the deck, he saw that the crew had completed lashing ropes along the deck to make moving around safer. He made his way to the wheelhouse where two men were busy at the helm working to keep the ship on course. Scott made his way below decks and moved around with his lantern checking the lashings of the cargo. Everything seemed to be holding well, and he hurried back on deck, joining forces there with William, the first mate, and the crew to secure the ship for the night ahead. "We must be near the center of this blasted hurricane," yelled Bolinski.

The captain merely nodded as he went to the rail and bellowed his orders through cupped hands against the screaming winds.

As the darkness of the storm became the blackness of night, the hour after hour of screaming and howling winds seemed to presage the end of the world to the exhausted men on board the ship. Warily Jens Anders came hand-over-hand along the safety lines to cup his hands about his mouth and yell into the captain's ear, "The seams are opening up, captain. There's water in the hold. We need a crew of men to man the pumps while we try to caulk the joints."

Captain Bogaart motioned Jens to stay with Scott, while he

made his way to the main deck. Men were climbing the riggings to take in the rest of the sail which had now become virtually shredded. Anchors were dropped to drag and try to steady the ship but they were soon torn loose and lost. The men worked desperately with the captain for the life of their ship as stays and cables, spars and sails were each lost overboard. Two men were swept with soundless screams into the towering and thundering seas, and there was no hope of finding or saving them.

After seventy-two hours the gray-faced captain came to the quarterdeck to relieve Scott at the wheel. "It's easing off a mite, I think," he yelled above the winds.

Scott was flexing his fingers, trying to get some life into his frozen hands. He peered blindly out into the boiling sea that was like a huge cauldron. The waves towered over them one moment and then dropped them like a stone the next. As they topped one crest they slid under the water afterwards. Then the little ship surfaced again to repeat the performance. Two more anchors were lost during that day. The winds shifted and the seas seemed to be coming from two directions at once. The screaming winds were so fierce that it seemed to Scott that the whole ship was lifted into the air before it was dropped back to submerge into the boiling water.

The gallant ship fought its way back to the surface again—and again—and yet again for countless times. By noon, however, the heavy rains stopped and the exhausted men felt a slight lessening of the winds. By nightfall there remained only the giant lifting swells, and the dark ominous clouds gradually disappeared over the horizon.

The exhausted crew was bruised, trembling, and close to collapse. A few men sank to the deck in exhausted, unconscious sleep while others staggered to their bunks. The first mate, his face gray with weariness, reported to the captain that a total of four men had been lost at sea. As he stepped out of the door, his knees buckled and he slid soundlessly to the deck where the captain let him lie.

By mid-morning, the lookout sighted patches of seaweed that looked freshly uprooted. It gave the men heart, for it

meant that land was not too far away. Signs of land increased hourly as the captain, with Scott and William, worked over the charts to place their position.

Their original destination had been Recife, Brazil, at one time a stronghold of the Dutch East India Company, but now a friendly Portuguese port. The hurricane had carried them so far off their destination, that they were now unsure of their ship's position.

"We are north of our destination," said the captain at last, "but we should be close enough to land to put in at some inlet to make some necessary repairs." He put his stubby finger on the chart. "We'll stop along here. It's near the mouth of the Amazon, but we can get fresh water, and perhaps meat. There should even be time for repairs—if we don't meet up with pirates," he muttered under his breath.

A loud rapping came at the door and a voice cried out, "Terra—terra; land—land!" Everyone on the ship ran to the rail, but it was late afternoon before the *Nina Marie* came into a bay on its only remaining sail. The land around them had high cliffs and was richly cloaked with tropical vegetation. To the men aboard ship, the little streams running down into the ocean and the many small atolls and islands, looked like a veritable paradise, even though they could see sharp jutting rocks through the moss green foam-flecked water. Gulls screamed overhead as they glided in over the ship, looking down at the men with curious eyes.

"Anchors!" called the captain clearly, then he added to Scott, "I'll take a longboat and eight men ashore and bring back water as well as look over the land. I must admit that it looks a fair country and will meet our immediate needs very well. It could have been bad if we had cliffs and heavy surf ahead."

Both Scott and William watched as the captain with eight men moved away from the ship in the longboat. They had both hoped to be first ashore and were a little envious as Bogaart and his crew disappeared into the cool green growth of the jungle.

William was leaning on the rail beside Scott. "It is said that

fresh water pours from this land out into the ocean for a hundred miles."

"The slave runners and the pirates have used these shores for many years, the captain says. Right now England has the slave franchise for Brazil, but poaching and pirating are almost completely uninhibited in this part of the world." Scott stood tall with his shoulders back, his eyes alert and eager.

William leaned on the rail and pinched his lower lip. "I've been in these waters before, too, Scotty, and this is a virtual pirate's nest. I'll be glad to get our repairs done and sail back into deep water again."

"I hear there are headhunters and cannibals here, too." Scott bounced aside to miss William's playful punch. They both stood and watched the sun set in the west toward the dense dark jungle. "I hope the captain finds that inlet so that we can make repairs. Our little ship isn't very seaworthy now." He paused a long moment. "I hear there are precious gems around here, too, and even gold. Maybe this is where we will all make our fortunes. The men would like that, and so would you, my brother-to-be, son of my parents' dear friend Menasseh ben Yakov. Just think how pleased my little sister would be if you came home with a chest of gold, and gems to drape over her." Scott was in a teasing mood, and the uncertainties of the moment were exhilarating to him.

William pointed soberly to the shore. "I can't see any signs of life from the beach. It seems to me that they should be making an appearance by now."

Scott ran his tongue over his cracked lower lip. "They have probably found a good spot to upend our ship, and maybe they'll even catch some fresh meat. Stop worrying, William. The captain is certainly no greenhorn, and he'll take all the necessary precautions." He turned as Chen Wong appeared and motioned urgently for them to follow him.

"You come. Men in bunk plenty sick. You come quick." The little Chinaman led the way, his slippers scuffing along the deck.

Scott and William half ran and half slid down the steep steps to the hold below, where the crew was quartered. Several of the men were doubled over with stomach pains. Each man had

a high fever and was sweating profusely. In all, there were seven men down with dysentery—a third of the crew. Short rations and verminous food were taking their toll, but when the captain returned, there would at least be fresh water. They sent Chen Wong for paragoric from the captain's medicine chest and did what they could to relieve the men's suffering.

The captain had not returned by dark and Scott and William returned to the deck, anxious to be out of the foul-smelling hold. What could be keeping Captain Bogaart in the jungle so long? Scott stood at the rail, considering what must be done if the longboat did not return and they were left with but a fraction of the men needed to man the ship. And the ship itself was not in any condition for a voyage.

A quarter moon was setting. It cast a flickering light across the restless waters as he walked up to the deck and approached the sentry on watch. "Is there any sign of the captain?"

"No, sir, no sign," was the answer.

Scott stared helplessly into the deep shadows on the mainland. A night wind was coming from that direction, bringing with it the heavy smell of rotting vegetation from the swamps. Faint moonlight flickered on the water as the moon dropped over the horizon. At last he spoke quietly. "What kind of shape is the other longboat in, William?"

The first mate answered in the same subdued tone. "It broke loose for a time during the storm, but it's above the waterline. I noticed that some of the seams have opened a little, but only a trickle of water is coming in so far. We could make shore with some bailing." He was quiet for a time and then he asked softly, "Scott, are you thinking we should go look for the captain?" His voice was doubtful.

Scott's hand came onto William's shoulder, "Certainly not until morning, my friend. What of our cannon?" Scott's voice continued calmly.

"I haven't checked as yet." William started toward the door.

"We'll both go." Scott followed William onto the deck where they found Jens Anders carefully looking over his armament. Scott and William stooped down beside the older man, a little anxious and yet also aware of the gunner's competence in his field.

At Scott's quiet question, he answered, "The powder kept dry, but we lost some of our shots. It is ready in case of an attack. Our problem is manpower."

"You are the best there is, Jens, and we have ourselves—William and you and I—and two other men fit for duty. Most of the able men went with the captain. When they come back, we will have a fighting crew again." He slapped Jens on the back encouragingly.

Chen Wong brought lanterns to hang in their brackets and Scott spoke sharply. "Hold up with those, Chen. One lantern in the bow is all you will put out." Chen looked at him with a question and then nodded in understanding as he took the lanterns below deck.

"It's best to be cautious if you think there might be trouble," William said.

"A dark night on a strange coast with a crippled ship is no time for carelessness. We are without proper sail and we're taking on water through the seams. A third of the crew is sick and the captain is not aboard. Yes, we'd best play it safe, wouldn't you say, William?"

"You are a lot like your father, Scott. You enjoy a bit of a fight, I think, but at the same time, you think ahead. You are right, of course. I'll take a watch while you get some rest. I'll wake you in time for your stint. Off with you, now. We'll both need rest for tomorrow when the captain gets back and wants us to put in a full day's work."

Scott peered into the darkness again. "Let's lower the long-boat before I turn in. Hopefully the captain will be back before we'll have to use it."

It was past midnight when William gripped Scott's shoulder, waking him, and together they went on deck. "You sleep for awhile, and I'll keep the watch. Has there been anything unusual?" Scott inquired.

William stretched tiredly, rubbing his hand over his hair. "I thought I heard faint voices across the water. It was most likely the captain and the men. There was nothing loud or unusual, and as a matter of fact it could have been merely monkeys in the trees. I just can't be sure, or I'd have called you then. Well,

it wasn't close, anyway. I'll go stretch out for a time. Yell if anything unusual occurs, and I'll be right here."

Scott watched him disappear into the darkness and then turned to look around at the familiar darkness of the ship. He'd best check the anchors against the incoming tide. Drifting onto the rocks would just about finish them. His hands found the chains taut and he quietly walked about the deck. Everything seemed to be secure enough.

He gazed long at the shoreline, and wondered about the faint voices that William thought he had heard. Could it be possible it was the captain? Yes, of course, it must be. Or could it be natives? But Bogaart had both swords and firepower plus the eight men. Besides he would try a friendly approach, for they could use all the help they could get for their ship. Of course, that was likely it!

Scott was bone-weary, and yet his mind would not let him rest. The sounds seemed to be coming from a different direction than the captain. Still, the breezes would drift voices around in such a way that they were impossible to figure out—especially from a distance.

Scott turned as he heard William's footsteps on the deck. He grinned, though his friend could not see it in the darkness, for he understood William's need to be outside. There was such a feeling of—quietness—in the air, of a tension that could not be identified. He listened again, testing the sounds of the sea and the slight creaking of the timbers of the ship. No, there was nothing. Suddenly he heard the screaming of a cat in the jungle not too far away. A frisson of feeling like fear ran up his neck and then he laughed softly. "That was likely your voices, William—the jungle is alive out there. You'd best get an hour or two of sleep, friend. Now you go back to your bunk, man, or you won't be fit for anything come daylight."

"I'd rather be here with you. I wasn't sleeping anyway." The two men gazed uneasily into the darkness. The mist was rising and the sky showed a faint lightening in the east.

Suddenly William grabbed Scott's arm and pointed. The solid dark outline of a three-masted ship had luffed in on the tide. They both stood transfixed for a long moment. Was it a merchantship—a pirate—or a naval vessel? Suddenly they both

ran to man the cannon, though it was as yet too dark to identify the small triangular pennant that whipped in the dawn breeze. Then with a lull in the wind, Scott caught sight of white against a dark background. Instantly he was certain it was a pirate ship!

“Get the men from below,” he yelled.

Chapter Twenty

William slid down the steep steps to the deck below as Scott yelled to the watch aft, "Release the anchors!" Grapeshot suddenly raked the decks. There followed a distant "boom" as the pirate ship closed on them rapidly.

Scott yelled orders to the few men on deck and then suddenly another volley, much closer and more lethal, of ball and grapeshot again raked the decks. It severed the mast which fell sideways with a tearing sound of timber and the screams of a man either caught by the shot or the falling mast. He knew that men lined the rail of the outlaw ship eagerly, ready to board the *Nina Marie*. They would be merciless as they came closer to their prey.

The pearl light of early morning flashed on the waving steel of the eagerly screaming pirates. Steadily Scott raised his own shining blade and encouraged the few men at hand, briefly wondering if William would be able to get the sick men onto their feet. Suddenly yet another volley—this time close at hand, raked across the deck. Chains and grapeshot brought screams from dying and injured men as Scott himself was knocked from his feet. He went down in a welter of rope and

gear—a confusion that saved his life, for a loud crash severed another mast.

The first mate emerged from below decks with the sick men, meeting with a pirate screaming his challenge as he leaped aboard, flashing his sword eagerly to meet William's steel.

Scott was dazed, but he fought blindly from under the virtual mountain of rubble, joining the battle with his men. With his sword raised high in his hand, he leaped to meet a mulatto with a ring in his ear. They fought desperately for a few moments, then Scott's strength and superior height gave him the advantage that he needed. He then turned to meet the next man who flew at him from a rope to drop onto the deck with a sword in his hand.

It took but a moment before Scott turned to see that William was in a deadly battle for his life. A laughing pirate grabbed Chen Wong's pigtail, jubilantly swung him around, and dropped him into the shark-infested waters.

As Scott turned to do battle with a darkly ugly pirate, he was sickened to see the men from the sickbay stagger onto the deck to be met with raucous laughter. They were quickly chopped down with deadly cutlass strokes. The blood ran freely into the scuppers as the dying men were tossed into the reddened, frothing sea.

At last the pirates swarmed aboard and Scott moved silently to fight back-to-back with William. They were at the shattered rails of their ship when still another "boom" sounded. It was immediately felt in the staggering ship, which had been hit below the waterline. The blow exploded one of the pirates' own cannons and grapeshot and chain flashed across the deck, killing two of the enemy.

William was the first to recover, and he saw that Scott's lower leg had been blown off. Desperately he ran to his friend's side to free him from the rubble.

Scott was oblivious of pain, and mindlessly striving to get back on his feet to do further battle. He staggered as he put his weight where there was no leg, and it was instinct alone that brought him to stand beside a piece of rail, not yet realizing that he was injured. He steadied himself, and then looked around him blindly.

William at last reached his crippled friend, whipped off his belt, and stooped to wrap it around the shattered stump of Scott's leg to stop the gush of lifeblood.

Scott gazed down at him without comprehension as William completed the tourniquet, and then turned blindly to raise his sword at the renewed attack of two more jubilant pirates. They easily overpowered Scott and threw him out into the bloody waters where the sharks were fighting violently over the men who were being tossed to them.

Scott fell near the longboat, and William dove after him. With a few strokes he virtually threw Scott into the boat and then jumped in. He cut the rope with his knife and they were free of the ship. The tide carried them swiftly toward the surf as the cries of their drowning shipmates followed them. But without oars they could do nothing for them. The pirates' laughter sounded across the waters as dark shapes darted like shadows through the seas.

From a distance William saw the villains moving alongside the *Nina Marie* with their longboats, swiftly unloading the crippled ship and carrying the cargo into their own holds. At last the Dutch ship was cut loose and he watched helplessly as she drifted upon the rocks and settled among them on her side, almost out of sight.

The longboat carried William and Scott deep into the heavy surf, moved sidewise, then suddenly overturned, dumping the two men into the boiling surf. Scott blindly fought his way to the surface, taking in great gulps of life-giving air. At last he tried to stand in the shifting waters and sand. With only one foot, the moving surf took his leg out from under him, and he submerged heavily into the churning waters. With despair he wondered how he would ever get out of the dangerous undertow, and realization almost overwhelmed him as he began at last to understand that he was no longer a whole man.

He was floundering in the churning water when William's arm reached across his back to support him and then virtually lifted him to his feet. They stood on three legs as Scott put his arm across the shoulder of the shorter man, and they gradually began to take arduous step after step through the shifting sands and churning water. Once Scott went down, and before

William could grasp him he was swept a few feet back into deeper water. When they came up for air, both men could see that it would be necessary to make those few difficult steps all over again, and Scott's jaw became rigid with effort.

At last, with William's arm across Scott's back, they rose from the surf and made their way to the water's edge. Sinking onto their knees they watched the longboat turn over again, tumble back into the deep water, and then as the breakers came in, be thrown again upon the beach. Now it was filled with water and they watched dazedly as it sank down onto the jagged rocks and finally disappeared from sight.

The two men turned to look around them. They seemed to be alone on the land, although they could hear the shouts and cries of men across the water. William lifted Scott's arm across his shoulders and they slowly staggered down across the sand in the early light, heading for the covering shelter of the jungle. It seemed impossible that they had escaped and yet no one seemed to be following them.

As they came close to the jungle, William's eyes searched the deep foliage warily, but there were only chattering monkeys to greet them. Flocks of parrots wheeling and squawking above the trees seemed all that took notice of their existence. William carried Scott into a thick tangle of vines and ferns and then found a vine-covered path that led between the massive trunks of great mahogany trees. Awkwardly and yet carefully he made his way along the path. Nearing a clearing, he heard only the cries and wails of natives and the shouts and curses of the pirates.

Turning, he suddenly saw that a boatload of privateers had landed on the beach and were headed along the trail behind them. William cast his eyes around desperately. Climbing over a steep embankment and swimming across the still waters of a swampy lagoon seemed the only escape, but he could see that it was entirely too difficult a maneuver for the half-conscious Scott. No, Scott could never make his way across that wide stretch of swamp water. Suddenly he saw the long dark snouts and black evil eyes of huge crocodiles basking in the green oily waters. No, the lagoon was obviously not the way.

He helped his friend off his back and laid him down against a

trunk of a huge tree. Then he crawled on his belly to peer through the foliage at the clearing below. What he saw, knotted the muscles of his belly. A group of natives were huddled close together, near the pirate captain, a tall, gaunt man with a peaked cap and gold-braided coat. He stood with a cutlass in his hand, using it to point out the natives to be taken as slaves.

William saw that the natives were tall and black-haired, with higher cheekbones and lighter skins than most Indians. They appeared to have once been a proud people, but now they were cringing from the lashes of the whips gripped in the hard fists of the pirates.

"That one," thundered the captain, "is for me." His voice was coarse and low. With his cutlass he pointed to a young girl, well-shaped and with comely features. One of the sailors stepped up and grasped her wrist, dragging her along toward the captain, and shoved her onto her face at his feet.

Her mother cried out, pleading for her daughter, dropping to her knees before the pirate leader. The girl, whimpering, reached out her hands. The captain, his face red with annoyance, grasped the older woman by the hair and literally threw her over the embankment into the lagoon below. Her single scream was quickly smothered as she was dragged into the depths by the crocodiles who were immediately galvanized into snarling, fighting, blood-crazed monsters.

William was sweating as the tension built within him and his hand gripped the handle of his knife. He knew the futility of facing this enemy, but could scarcely restrain himself. It was the thought of Scott's helplessness that held him back. He slithered backwards to look down at his friend. God, he looked bad. It would be a miracle if he lived at all unless help came soon. The natives certainly could not handle an amputation such as Scott needed, and the marauders would surely not help a dying man. It certainly seemed that he and Scott were the only survivors from the ship, so there was no chance—unless the captain had somehow remained free and could help them.

He heard more screams, hopeless ones this time, and he scrambled back to watch. He saw that several of the older tribesmen had been lined up along the embankment. They

were closer to him now and he could clearly see their dazed and hopeless expressions.

"Gold," shouted the captain as though by his louder voice they could understand him better. He turned to the oldest native and repeated his demands, "Gold—or you die." He pointed his cutlass at the men lined along the bank of the dark green, turgid pool.

One old man stooped and raised an earthen pot, pouring out gold dust and some tiny nuggets for the captain to see. The man's greedy eyes lit up as he reached for the pot, spilling some onto the ground where it lay glittering in the sunlight. The captain looked at his men. All eyes were greedily looking at the gleaming metal. The captain commanded their eyes with his thin smile and silently gave them his challenge to see if any dared try to grab what he held. His cutlass was ready in his hand, and all stood silently. Contemptuously the captain lifted the lid of his chest with the toe of his boot and poured the gold into it before tossing the empty vessel aside.

He then turned back to the old man. "Not enough. More!"

The old man shook his head and raised his hands to show that that was all. "Nada—no more."

The captain strode over to the line of men and with his cutlass, casually shoved one over the bank to splash into the pool.

"More gold," he yelled again. "Now."

"Nada, senior. No more." The old man went to his knees, pleading, trying to make the pirate leader understand that he had no more to give.

William was appalled at this callousness and then the sickness in his belly turned to rage as he watched the dark crocodiles climbing over themselves to get to this fresh morsel for their palates. The new blood was urging them to a frenzy of eager activity. He doubted that the old chief had understood what the captain had demanded and he yelled an involuntary protest as the captain moved to the next man in the lineup.

At the sound of his voice, their eyes all turned to William. He rose, for there was no use hiding longer. If they came to him, they would find Scott, so he stepped out to meet them.

"In the name of decency, man, have you no heart?" he demanded of the captain, looking him squarely in the eyes.

The captain gave him an oblique milky stare. "And who might you be?" he asked, annoyed at this interruption.

William stood with legs slightly apart, his shoulders back, and spoke firmly, though he knew that his life had small expectancy beyond the next few minutes. "I am the first mate of the *Nina Marie* out of Amsterdam." He pointed toward the ship that he knew was on the rocks below, though it could not be seen through the dense foliage around them.

"You are a Jew, claiming to be Dutch." The captain turned to one of his men. "Dutchy, here is a man claiming to be one of your countrymen. Should we show him some consideration?" The captain laughed loudly, then added, "Some consideration to the crocs, that is. They are still hungry!"

Dutchy had a wolfish grin and he beckoned as two of his mates with drawn swords advanced menacingly on William.

William's knife came into his hand as the men approached and he gave a shrill battle cry as Dutchy was caught in the belly by his expertly thrown knife.

The pirate dropped his sword and reached for the knife handle that protruded from his vitals. William dove at the legs of another attacker and swung to tip the man into the pool which was threshing with the foaming of the wildly excited crocodiles. William reached to grasp the handle of Dutchy's sword just as another pirate lunged at him. His return parry brought blood from eyebrow to jaw as he slashed across the pirate's cheek. This thrust off-balanced the pirate and the man fell in the swirling pool below to join his mate. William turned to defend himself as two other villains grasped him from behind and twisted the sword from his hand. They were just about to throw him bodily into the pond when the captain spoke roughly.

"Tie him up. He'll bring a good price in the slave market—after he has been tamed some. A few weeks below, in the slave deck on short rations will quiet him."

The captain then turned to Dutchy. "You know the rules, man. The wounded stay behind."

"For God's sake, Captain Gann, I can make it to the ship. A few days and I'll be as good as new and I'll be able to do my share of the work," he pleaded.

The captain nodded to the pirate nearest him who strode to

the wounded man and jerked the knife free. The blood gushed from Dutchy's vitals as his mate dragged him screaming to the cliff's edge and dumped him over into the pond.

Scott lay behind a log and realized dazedly what was going on. He shuddered as he heard the deafening war cry from William. Then, stunned, he heard the captain say that William would be taken as a slave. The loss of his friend and his own helplessness was too great for his mind to accept. He struggled until the pain in his wounded leg became overwhelming and he sank into the quiet blackness of oblivion.

For a few precious moments he was free from pain and anguish and then gradually he came back to awareness. He considered his situation. He knew that there was no escape for him, for he was unable to run, and his glazed eyes saw that his hiding place was inadequate. His leg had become a solid vise of pain that gripped him and coursed demandingly through his mind. He knew that he should release the belt binding, if only for a few minutes. Perhaps that would give him some relief—or it would overwhelm him with a surge of his life's blood from the released, torn blood vessels.

But then, he thought, it would make no difference to the crocodiles if his leg got infected, for that was obviously where he would end up when he was found—and of course he *would* be found. His features twisted with a grimace of pain.

His back was cramping now and he tried to move, but he was tangled in the long roots and vines that hung from the trees and ground like snakes. His mind was unstable with the shock of his injury and yet he feverishly went over and over the problem of how he could save William.

His father had told him of the killing of his grandfathers, Alexandr Bolinski and Solomon ben Adhem—at Voronezh—and the torture they had endured. He had actually believed that times like those were no more, not in 1734—but this almost seemed worse than any they had endured—innocent people being carried off to lives of slavery. He was forced to wait helplessly for the pirates to simply come and roll him into the crocodile pool below. There surely must be more to life than this—just waiting for evil executioners. He beat his hand angrily and feverishly against the ground.

In his helpless anguish his fingers helplessly pulled and gripped spasmodically at the earth and the tendrils of vines that were all around him. His mind gradually became conscious of what his fingers were telling him, that these small limp vines were as tough as rope. He wrapped several of them around his arms and across his shoulders and wrists. He had to guess at their length and his mind erratically sought the answers. When he had secured these pliant "ropes," he rolled over onto his side to hide the vines that he had secured around himself. At last he sank back exhaustedly into unconsciousness. The heat of the day in these jungles, the loss of blood—and his friend—his leg, and the intense emotional stress all had taken their toll of his willpower.

Scott was unaware that his leg was visible from the trail, for he had moved around a great deal. His trouser leg was bloody and shredded and his unconsciousness gave him a look of death to the men passing by. He awoke to the sound of the captain saying, "We want no witnesses here," and he heard footsteps come along the trail, then stop. A foot was placed against his side, then with a shove and a kick, he was over the edge and falling toward the dank, dark lagoon below.

Scott's arm was nearly jerked from its socket, but the rope-like vines wrapped around it stopped his fall with his good leg hanging but a few feet above the water. His severed leg started a new flow of blood that dripped into the pool. The huge crocodiles swam about in a frenzy. But they were unable to reach him as he hung far above them. He lost consciousness again and hung limp from the rope vines that held his wrists.

The frenzied sounds of the man-eaters convinced the pirates, that the injured man was in the pool and they went on their way, herding the slaves before them like animals.

Jens Anders was on his way to the deck to report when he was blown over the side of the *Nina Marie* into the restless waters below. A section of the railing had also been flung over the side and Jens made his way to it and hung on for dear life. He rolled on the swells as the tide moved in and the wind helped to carry him toward the beach.

In the light of early morning, he could see the crew as they

were thrown overboard. The dorsal fin of a shark cut past him, streaking for the thrashing arms of the men as they vainly tried to reach the shore—those who were not too far gone to care. Quickly he withdrew his moving arms from the water until he saw that the sharks were centered near the ship. Then he paddled hurriedly to increase his distance from the crippled vessel.

The sun was an hour past sunup and Jens was grateful that he had not been seen by the pirate ship. Rising on a swell, he looked back and saw the longboat go ashore, but he was too far away to identify the two men that were dumped from it into the surf. His own unstable raft got stuck in a kelp bed and he had to use both hands to pull against the floating tendrils and free himself and his craft and move toward the beach. As he went through the breakers, he lost his hold on the railing and was tumbled about in the surf. Finally he regained his footing. He stayed low and when he reached the dry sand, ran through it, crouching low until he could hide in the dense jungle growth. With his heart pounding, he followed a trail cautiously for a short time, keeping as quiet as he could. He knew there would be natives, probably hostile, as well as the pirates.

The path was virtually roofed with creeping vines and ferns, huge and waving, limiting his view down the path. Fearfully he decided not to go further for he didn't know what he would run into and he didn't feel capable just yet of meeting another problem. He slid off the path between gigantic ferns and turned to his left. His heart jolted at the sight of a man sitting against a tree, and then steadied as he saw that it was Captain Bogaart grinning at him.

Jens stepped forward with a lifting of spirits, for the captain would know what should be done. He must be unaware of the pirate attack. Suddenly a cold chill went down his back, as he saw the dead bodies of his mates that had been hidden in the coarse green grass. Their jackets had been torn open and their pockets pulled out.

His eyes went to the captain and he could see the sightless eyes that seemed to stare at him. Yes, the captain was dead, too, for his brass buttons had been ripped off. They had been a special gold casting of eagle heads and were heirlooms.

Yes, the bodies had been robbed of whatever of value they carried. He went closer and saw that a vine was wrapped around the captain's neck and he was tied to a huge mahogany tree. He had been garroted and had died with a deadly grimace on his face.

Jens moved rapidly back down the trail where he could see the ship but could not be seen by the pirates. The *Nina Marie* was on the jagged coral rocks and taking water through her broken hull. Repairs would be hopeless. In only a matter of hours the ship would be torn apart, plank by plank. He noticed that the pirate ship rode deep in the water, no doubt from the contraband she had collected from many captured ships.

Occasionally Jens could hear the guttural voices of the pirates and carefully kept out of sight. There was certainly no use in coming up against so numerous and formidable a foe with no weapons to hand. At last he decided to see what was going on, for his curiosity overcame his fear, though he must be quiet and careful.

He passed the grinning corpse of the captain and his knees weakened as he saw the big flesh-eating ants crawling over the face. "Oh, sweet Mother of God," he muttered as he started forward, outraged. Then he paused, for what could he do? There was no way that he could bury the men and nature would not allow this stain to remain upon the land. Soon only rags, covered by vines, would mark the site of their death.

Sadly Jens crept cautiously in the direction of human voices. As they became louder, he moved more slowly and carefully, for if he was caught now, it would mean certain death.

He heard the pitiful cries of women and children and bursts of laughter from the pirates. His eyes caught sight of a movement near him and he jumped to one side as a large python slid along a tree limb close by. It made his flesh creep and he knew that he would have to leave the jungle before dark. Snakes, panthers, crawling things—Jens longed for the safety of the open seas.

The leap to one side gave him a new position and from here he could see some of the moving figures. The pirates were driving people before them like cattle. Slave traders! And one of them was William, the son of Menasseh ben Yakov! Jens felt

his belly twist in revulsion. Broken families and a life of servitude under inhuman conditions. How could men allow such evil? Or was there a God at all? But he was not in a doubting position now, for he needed divine help if he himself was to survive—more than at any time in his thirty-nine years. Yes, he must help William—but how? It would not help the boy if Jens were caught, but there had to be some way he could free the lad.

Jens could hear the buildup of grief in those who were left behind. He turned to peer through the screen of ferns to catch a glimpse. The natives were Indians, but Indians with fairer skins than most. He felt his fear of them leave him. He still wasn't sure that they wouldn't kill and perhaps even eat him, but without some kind of help he would not survive. And he had to get help to rescue William. He turned to peer at the pirates and their captives again. He must be sure that they were out of sight before he showed himself.

A hand came from behind him and covered his mouth and he felt the sharp point of a knife in his back. It was the grip of a boy, but a knife can be fatal even in the hands of a lad. Jens held still.

In a few minutes the grip relaxed, but the knife held steady against his back. Jens ventured a look and saw that it was a frightened youngster no older than twelve. Jens opened his arms and showed the boy that he was completely unarmed, then slowly opened his vest, revealing no hidden weapons.

The lad motioned to Jens, pointing toward the village. At sight of him, the villagers turned angry and, except for the boy's explanations, they would have attacked him as a lone pirate and thus subject to their wrath.

Suddenly attention was turned from him when a group of natives carried in a body of a white man. His leg had been torn off a few inches below the knee and was turning an angry blue red color.

Jens saw the dark red hair against the bone-white face. "Scotty," he called out and ran forward to help carry him.

Scott opened his eyes, not sure how long he had been unconscious, but vaguely remembering being moved. Now he

looked around him and saw that he was in a bamboo shack. From the outside came sounds of distant jungle drums and he could smell a fire burning outside. His vision was distorted and a white woman flitted in and out of his sight as the pain in his body seemed to take him to the verge of screaming. He then remembered his injury and forced himself to look down at his legs. The stump was still bound with William's belt. William! The thought twisted inside him. His hand reached down to touch the limb—it was turning an ominous green. He fumbled with the strap, but his strength had gone and he fell back onto the straw beneath him, unconscious once again. At last his eyes gradually opened and his face turned toward the sound of chanting.

The bamboo curtains parted and a man entered and, through the opening, Scott saw men around a fire. They were testing the heat of a flat metal axe which had been embedded in the glowing coals. His eyes went to the man coming toward him. He was dressed in a costume of feathers and beads with white markings on his coppery face. As he came beside him, Scott's eyes closed and the witch doctor looked upward and intoned weird sounds. Scott thought they must be prayers of some kind. He watched remotely as three more men entered, their upper bodies bare and glistening with oil. One came to stand at his head and one came to each side of the bed. They reached to take hold of Scott's arms and pressed him firmly down against the pallet of straw.

Scott tried to fight them off, mumbling incoherent protests, his face sweating from fever and weakness. A fourth man came into the room and removed the belt and Scott could not completely suppress his scream as watery blood oozed from the swollen stump. As a short piece of log was placed under the injured knee, the men put all of their weight on Scott's leg. The witch doctor then proceeded to make a neat cut around the leg above the shredded wound and just below the knee. The natives slid the log under the exposed bone and with the razor-sharp axe, cut through the bone in a single stroke—thus severing the rotted piece from his body.

The men felt Scott's body jerk in a tremendous involuntary jerk of revolt and then go limp again. Fresh blood was gushing

from the new wound and a white hot iron was placed against the fresh cut to cauterize the wound.

The acrid smell of burned flesh filled the room as the unconscious Scott was stripped of clothes and examined for other wounds. No others were found so the men left a young boy to fan the limp naked body and keep the flies and other vermin from infesting the burned wound.

Jens Anders came at last to sit wearily beside his friend. "It had to be done, boy. You couldn't have lived else. I'm sorry, lad. But it will get better now—you'll see. Sometimes the things we have to stand are almost more than a soul can take, but now you'll survive, son. Pray Gōd it hasn't affected your mind. Steady, steady, now—calmly, calmly," he whispered gently and compassionately as he wiped the sweat-beaded face and comforted Scott in his agonies.

Tibela di Almagro entered the hut quietly and placed her hand on Jens' shoulder. "I will take care of him for a while—you must rest. We have much time before us while he recuperates—if he does. It is best for you to sleep now yourself."

Jens nodded and got wearily to his feet, touching Scott's bright hair briefly before he left.

The days and nights became as one to Scott, Tibela and Jens as they fought for the big man's life. Some food was pressed between the sick man's lips, only to be repelled by his stomach in violent retching. Chills and fever alternated and the weight poured from his big body. Even Jens became gaunt with the effort to save his friend's life.

In the village compound, prayers were muttered by the witch doctor to exorcise the evil from the white body of the man writhing in his pain. Small animals were sacrificed and smoke filled the room as Scott raved wildly in his delirium; his body fighting to win over an unseen enemy, speaking in words that even Jens could not understand.

Unconsciously, Scott prayed violently to die, screaming out the wish. He hated the pain and the loss of his limb. But the strength of his body would not let him go.

With soft murmurs, Jens tried reason. "No, lad, I cannot let you die. You are selfish perhaps. Dying would bring you relief

from this pain, but it would bring agony to your family. Think, lad, think ye of your blood. That which is in your body comes from a race that has a will to live, and a purpose to win—no matter the pains and the loss. Be calm, boy, for soon it will be over and you can start to live again." His words seemed to help and to sustain the healing will of the man on the straw pallet.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tibela di Almagro dipped the cloth yet again into the cool water that had been boiled with mint leaves. She wrung out the cloth and wiped Scott's face. Would his fever never break? Part of the problem was that they had been unable to get the herb tea past his throat, which meant the fever would have to run its own course, if he lived.

She sat back and dabbed at her forehead and neck with a lace-edged scrap of cambric, looking down at Scott's ashen face. She held his hand in one of hers because it seemed to comfort and calm him. Idly, she thought that he must be a giant of a man. His thrashing hand came up to almost strike her cheek but his fingers stilled at her satin touch and then gentled within her hand, and clung to her fingers. Yes, big though he was, it was obvious he was tender as well.

With a wry twist of her mouth, she thought of her husband, who had been heavy and coarse and never tender or gentle. She had not seen him for three years, thank God. His ruthlessness had repelled her and she had been very grateful when he found a mulatto mistress to satisfy his demands. Then he had gone to Portugal for two years, leaving her because of

the imminent birth of her child. It was shortly after his return that he had disappeared. She was a married woman without a husband—and gladly so, under the circumstances.

Scott thrashed again, tossing off his blanket to expose yet again his nakedness, and she rose to attend to him. He had become as familiar to her hands as her own body. She wiped his face and chest with the cool mint water and touched a cup to his lips. His tongue licked eagerly at the moisture.

“Senora, you must get some sleep. Your eyes are beginning to show the strain. I am sorry, and yet grateful, too, for your being here.” Tibela felt Jens touch her arm, gently drawing her away from the sick man.

“The natives would not be able to nurse a wound such as his, and every man deserves a chance to live—which he would not have without me.” Tibela stretched wearily, her silken ivory skin dewed with the oppressive heat. “We must see that he is moved from this place when he is able. He would recover more surely and faster in better conditions.”

“If he recovers at all, my lady, it will be as a result of your ministrations. We are fortunate indeed that you have come to us, thank you for everything.”

“De nada, senor. Since I was a girl, I have ministered to the needs of my people. My grandfather was a physician and the old women of Chief Lamoni’s tribe have taught me their arts.” She smoothed both sides of her black hair, and tucked in a stray end. “I must go for a short time to my home to see that all is well during my absence. I will return as quickly as possible.”

While she was gone, Scott opened his eyes and Jens could see that he was at last rational. Scott looked around the hut with glazed eyes and saw his friend calmly waving a palm leaf over his naked body to cool him and keep the flies from his now healing wounds. His eyes cleared and he weakly raised his hand in greeting. He tried to sit up, but his body would not respond to his will.

Jens rose immediately to his feet, excitedly calling out, “He’s awake! He’s awake!” and pressed a cool hand to Scott’s forehead, his white teeth showing in a big grin as he murmured encouragement to the sick man. He yelled, “Bring the broth and water. We’ve got to get some strength into him now.”

A laughing boy came with water and women brought food,

giggling and enjoying Jens' laughter as he poured cool liquid over Scott's cracked lips. It ran down over his chin and out of the side of his mouth as his throat worked convulsively to retain as much as he could of the welcome moisture. He choked and Jens raised his head so he could more easily allow the liquid to run down his throat. He was given another swallow and at last he was able to get it down. He became aware of his great consuming thirst and he would have weakly taken the bowl and gulped all its contents down, but he did not have the strength. Finally, Scott sank back, exhausted.

The women and the men who had crowded into the little hut all laughed and joked in their alien tongue at his efforts. The word ran like wildfire through the village that the giant with flaming hair would live.

The sailor elbowed the men aside and with laughing yet firm orders, cleared the room at last. Scott smiled weakly at his friend, then drifted into a half doze, to be wakened by Jens' spooning of hot chicken broth into his mouth.

Tibela knew the crisis had passed and her visits became more brief as Jens took over the arduous recovery. For the next several days, Scott wavered between trying to live and yet wishing to die. His dreams were becoming a nightmare for both men as Scott wondered how he could ever face his father and Sampson as half a man—a cripple forever. Waking, he ground his teeth in bitterness at his impotence and he talked endlessly, wondering how he could possibly accept life here in the wilderness, and yet not wanting to leave it—dreading the outside world.

"How can I stand before my father, Jens, crawling, and tell him that on my very first trip away from home I have lost my crew, my cargo, and my ship. It would have been better for me to die, and then at least he could think of me with pride. How can he have pride in me—half a man—no good to anyone—not even myself," Scott argued violently.

"It's all right, lad. All will be better in time."

"I tell you, I would rather die! Get out and leave me alone, Jens, and maybe I can die in peace." And Jens went, knowing that there were times when a man had to face himself and what he would be—his now and his future.

Scott did not die—yet he refused to face reality. His stinking

leg drew the blue bottle flies and, without Jens, the buzzing was the only sound in the shanty. The pain never seemed to leave him and the humidity and heat enveloped him like a smothering blanket. He lay there sweating, letting his mind carry him back to Holland, to home. If only he could run through the fields again and feel the cool breezes blowing across the channel.

Run? He would never run again, he thought in bitter agony. He threw his arm across his smarting eyes, feeling a wave of self-pity for his own loss. He yearned for the comfort of his mother's love. How would his father really feel? Certainly there would be no more tests of strength—but yes, there would be love. His shoulders twisted in a sob at his great need for the strength and support that his parents could give to him. And Sampson—how could he ever face him again—all that training for battle and for meeting the world as a man. It was gone now—and what was left? A mere hulk of a useless man, a half man, surely one destined to be scorned by both men and women. No, there could never again be the dancing or the shy glances of pretty girls. He would have to forget any thoughts he might have had of a wife and a family. His head turned from side to side restlessly as his mind returned to his memories. Still, he had his life, and with time—perhaps he could find some substitute for what had been his bright hopes.

Scott heard a commotion as though someone had come into the room. Peevishly he refused to take his arm from across his eyes. He was not yet ready to face men, and especially Jens with his eternal nursing comfort.

But he had at last admitted that he was willing to live and he turned to open his eyes. He felt a cold lump cramp in his stomach, for a woman, somehow familiar, was looking down at him. An angel? For awhile he had prayed for death, and his prayers might have been answered! Yes, he had died. But with this lovely one for company, he was satisfied. He relaxed and smiled.

A hand touched his shoulder, pulling the light cover higher over his chest. He turned to see Jens standing beside the—angel? "What are you doing here?" he asked faintly.

Jens turned and with a faint grin he said, "Sorry princess, but this redhead does not always stare with his mouth open. He

seems to be out of his head again. Given time he will recover and you can talk then."

She gave a spontaneous light laugh that reminded Scott of tinkling bells.

"I guess I was dreaming," Scott said. "I thought you were an angel. I mean you look like an angel—not a dead one—I mean a live one," he stammered weakly, trying to bring his confused thoughts into reliable order.

She held out her hand and took his, but he was afraid to touch her for fear she might not be real. "I am Tibela di Almagro. My father was the don of these people. He was their judge and then the people called him lord. Some call me "princess," but I prefer to be called Tibela by my friends." She spoke to him in Hebrew.

Jens spoke up. "This is Scott Alexandr Bolinski, known by his friends as Scotty, miss." He looked at them both. "I have work to do and I will leave you to talk and get acquainted."

Scott lay on the straw mat, his long tapering muscles glistening with sweat. He glanced down to see that the lower part of his body was indeed covered and his severed leg out of sight. He was sensitive about his loss and did not want to offend the princess with a show of immodesty.

As Tibela's dark-fringed eyes looked down at him, he caught the intensity in them. He felt a deep yearning as he gazed into their seagreen liquid depths. Her shining dark hair was parted in the center and drawn back into a large roll at the nape of her neck. She had small neatly pierced ears and smooth olive skin. Her nose was patrician in shape and her lips were full and rosy red. Scott half raised his hand to touch her shining hair, then let it fall to his side. He had nothing to offer her.

Tibela looked down and was pleased at the look in Scott's deep-brown, intelligent eyes. He had the hawkish look of his ancestors, she thought. But she could only guess at the source of the flaming red hair and beard. She pulled his hand up to her lips in a gesture of friendliness, and his generous mouth parted in a wide smile to show his strong white teeth. The incisors were prominent and needle-sharp. Tibela felt a quiver go through her. Softly she caught her breath. "I am glad you are doing so much better, my friend. Sometimes I wondered if you would make it."

"I thought that you were an angel," Scott managed to say with a little laugh. "Especially when you spoke in the language in which God and the angels speak to men. Perhaps you are one of His special ones."

Tibela laughed softly, then answered, "Oh, I am far from being an angel."

Scott felt a quick response within him at the sound of this beautiful girl-woman, for she was mature. He recognized the Portuguese ancestry, but there was more—Indian, perhaps—and also some Jewish? She had pride and even arrogance, perhaps haughtiness. Her eyes had smile wrinkles at the corners and her lips curved over even, pearly teeth. It took his breath away to look at this beautiful face with the lively laughing eyes. His eyes went to her breasts, which were full. She had nursed a child, he thought with regret, yet with a rising sense of excitement, too. She had nursed him, he thought—and cared for his body. He felt color rise to his cheekbones at the thought and he felt the flash of a consuming wish to know her body as she knew his. His eyes fell away from hers as he spoke in Spanish.

"Jens tells me you have saved my life, senora. Whatever service I may give to you, whatever is in my power, I mean to."

"De nada, my friend. I enjoy performing such service. It often falls that I help my people in this way, but it is not often that I must contend with muscles such as yours, senor." Laughing, her fingers lightly squeezed his upper arm.

Without thought his fingers grasped hers and brought the palm of her hand to his lips. The light fragrance on the inner side of her wrist caught his attention. It was delicious to his senses after the putrid odors of his leg. His eyes flew to hers and then clung to her soft, full, lower lip.

Her voice interrupted his thoughts. "The Indians cannot stay here, my friend, for the pirates may return. You must all move deeper into the forest. I can now arrange for you to go with them." She sighed. "I must not tire you on this visit. We will have time to talk when you are well."

Scott raised his hand to protest, but it was too late for she had left. He lay there, unconscious now of the heat, as he savored every detail of her visit. Against this savage background, she stood out, clear as a picture to him. She was

slender as a reed, beautiful, regal, remote as a goddess, and yet there was a palpitating wildness in her. She was more than a picture; she was—life!

He fleetingly wondered how he must have looked to her and the thought embarrassed him—laying there half naked, flies buzzing around, the putrid smell of his rotting flesh. But he was puzzled. Why had she come? From where? And why was she concerned about him? He was a stranger, and yet he felt her to be a trusted friend. His thoughts tried to explore his elusive concern about her.

Suddenly it came to him. In those lovely eyes, he had seen shadows, shadows of long and deep standing. He was impatient with himself for he had let their conversation center on himself, never asking about her life, never finding the answers about her. Not asking if there was a way he could give her aid, give her help. Help! he thought. How can I help her? I am only half a man, not even able to get out of my bed. He raised the light sheet and felt a wave of sheer desperation.

His thoughts now turned to the captured William and to his own inability to aid his closest friend. He was no good to anyone! Perhaps William might have escaped! He could have traveled secretly down the coast to Belem. But, no, his friend had chosen to be taken in order that he, Scott, would be safe. It was almost certain death—a living death—as a slave. And what of little sister Ruth? "Bring him safely back to me," she had pleaded.

He turned restlessly to relieve the anguish of his mind. This pirate leader, Captain Gann—somehow he must find them—and soon—William and the crew. And what about his parents? By now, they would be expecting word from him. He must find a way to let them know that he was safe. Safe? Well, at least alive.

Jens came back into the hut grinning. "I escorted the princess to her horse. She had Indian guards with her. She said she is sending some mules for us so that you will not have to walk. Did she say where we were going?"

"No, Jens, but anywhere is better than here. The village is in constant danger of marauders. I just wish to God that I could get about—other than by crawling, that is."

Jens held up a wooden crutch. "Will this do for a start? It's

made from the best piece of timber I could find. Once you get used to it, you'll be almost as good as new." As Scott's eyes clouded over, Jens knew that his friend was going to have an unusually difficult time adjusting to his new way of life. Still, Scott had best know their actual situation.

"I went to the beach and found that the *Nina Marie* is nothing but kindling now, Scott. I got the natives to help and we pulled the two cannons ashore along with some shot. But the damned pirates took all the powder. I secreted the guns and shot in the jungle. The vines will have it hidden by morning. I never saw such a growing country."

Tiredly, Scott lay back. "Thanks, Jens. That sounds the right thing to have done." He saw his friend's disappointment at his lack of interest and he stirred his thoughts to other matters. "I don't know what's cooking, but it sure smells good."

Jens brightened. "Well, you'd better eat plenty. Tomorrow we move out with the villagers, and you need to build up your strength."

Scott enjoyed his first full meal and a quiet night's sleep. He woke hungry and had just finished his breakfast of lamb stew when Jens rushed in.

"The Indians are here to move us, Scott, and you'd better obey their orders, lad."

Scott raised himself on his elbow. "Jens, I haven't the strength of a newborn kid. I guess I'll just go along with what anyone directs—for now." His eyes lit up in a weak challenge.

Two of the strongest natives carried Scott from his bed to the cowhide litter stretched between two stout poles. There was room for him to stretch out full-length on the cowhide between the well-broken trail animals. Indian guides and guards rode at the beginning and end of their little procession and Jens rode the lead mule that carried Scott.

They advanced for some distance in this manner before Scott demanded that they stop. He was waving his arms and protesting to the Indian guide. Jens turned back and stood with hands on his hips in exasperation. His voice was loud as he replied to Scott's demands.

"No, Scott, you must not try to ride at this point. It will set back the healing of your leg."

Scott was equally loud and adamant. "I am the best judge of

that, Jens. I demand to have an animal to ride. I'm no baby to be trundled around in a carriage. Get me up on a mount, my friend." His voice had turned pleading.

"You are without doubt the most stubborn, mule-headed, obstinate man that I have ever known. You are going to have a problem with that leg and I suppose you will expect me to be your wet nurse again. Well, I'll tell you this, if you get sick again because of your stubbornness, you'll get no help from me! And that's a fact!" Jens was yelling now.

Scott broke into a hearty laugh and Jens looked down at him, with eyebrows up and mouth open. It was the first time he had heard Scott laugh since their ship had been raided. He gradually joined in with a chuckle of his own and gladly helped Scott climb upon a mule.

Though the flesh was quite healed on Scott's stump, it would be some time before the bone mended and the pain left. As he shifted about on his mount, he could not seem to relieve the pressure of his injured leg against the saddle. After only fifteen minutes of such discomfort as this, Scott wished he'd stayed on the litter.

He spoke to the guide. "Amigo, how far do we go?"

"Three, maybe four hours, senor," the man responded.

"Is your leg giving you much pain, Scott?" Jens asked.

"No trouble at all," Scott lied, but by noon he wished he'd not had so much pride and hoped the men would not have to pick him up from the ground unconscious. His spurt of energy had all but gone and he was desperately praying that he could stick to the saddle for just a few minutes more. They must be getting close to their destination.

He tried to concentrate on the surroundings. The jungle was a great mass of trees, vines, ferns—all carpeted with heavy green foliage. Small clear-water streams were numerous, all flowing toward the great Amazon River. Thousands of butterflies with glassy transparent wings flew like blue spirits through the untouched forests. Blue green parrots swirled among the trees. "This is the land that the Princess Tibela calls home," Scott thought. Surely she could not be living with the Indians in their camps—in a shanty.

Scott had not noticed, but Jens had approached the guide and stopped the train. "We need to rest," he said.

The guide looked about the forest with concern, but realized that the red-haired giant was weak. Scott gave a token protest, insisting that he could continue, but suddenly gave in and was helped to the ground. He stretched upon the grass and gave an involuntary sigh of relief, then looked up at Jens with gratitude in his eyes. "Give me a few minutes. Then I'll be ready again."

The guards scattered out and disappeared into the jungle, for this was Xingo country—home of cannibals and stealers of boys and girls, cousin to the Jivaros, the headshrinkers, who gave bounty for heads, especially those of white men.

Jens paced back and forth. "I wish we were back at sea, for I surely don't like this spooky forest. I hope we reach our destination soon. I fear for the looks of you right now, Scott, I don't know how much longer you can last."

It was late in the day when they finally arrived at the new camp of Chief Lamoni, deep in the forest. Dazedly Scott allowed Jens to put him to bed. It was nine days before the sick man was able to be up and about again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chief Lamoni sat at jungle's edge where he could watch for the return of Tibela di Almagro. He spat on the ground and uttered an oath in his native dialect as her name crossed his mind. The girl had been raised in the Portuguese way of obedience to an arranged marriage, but disaster and unhappiness had been the result. Frequent tragic things had happened since that unfortunate union. Slave traders had captured many of his own people and taken them to be sold as slaves in a far-off land. Many others had been killed.

He watched a small lizard creep across his foot. Then his thoughts returned to the girl. Tibela did not know that he, Lamoni, was her great-grandfather, that he watched over her faithfully. Only a few of the older council members knew of this relationship and their silence had held through all the years. Oh, she knew that she had Indian blood, and she was proud of her ancestry, but she did not yet know of her relationship to him.

The chief had kept the secret because the girl's father wished her alliance to the di Almagro family stressed. He felt it ensured her safety from the Portuguese Inquisition against the

Jews. And di Almagro would never have married Tibela if he had known of her Indian blood. The chief spat again with distaste at the thought of the man that she had married. He had been intrigued by the girl's fresh and vivid beauty, but it had not taken the new husband long to find additional romantic interests, especially after she was with child.

The old man leaned to scratch his ankle, wishing that it was possible to tell her of their relationship. He was sure that she would not be revolted by the knowledge.

Of course he did not want to bring her embarrassment, but surely there would come a day when she could safely know. He thought of Tibela's child and a smile curved his lips. At least the boy was one good thing from the union with di Almagro.

She ought to be coming along soon. She was visiting the injured seaman with the hair like a flaming sunset. The trail was safe enough with his warriors watching to see that no harm befell her.

The seaman and his friend had been the only survivors of a ship that had been attacked by pirates. But the young giant could be an answer to his prayers. He could help the girl save her home and the great plantation. She needed a husband to protect her, for he, Lamoni, was old. Who would care for her when he had gone?

The old leader allowed himself a wheezy chuckle as he thought of how his proud little great-granddaughter would stamp her foot in indignation if she knew his thoughts about finding her a strong husband. Surely the flame-haired man would be very strong when he recovered from the loss of his leg.

The chief had other problems as well. His tribes were having trouble in protecting themselves from Chief Puka and his cannibals. The cannibals had become bolder and bolder in their raids against the village and they were taking as many children as they could. Tibela had helped him appeal to the captain-general for help, but the man had done nothing as yet. And, too, the pirates had captured many of his people and taken them for slaves. He desperately needed help to prevent the complete destruction of his villages and to stop the suffering and death that followed the raiders' coming.

He scratched the side of his neck and thought it had been a

disastrous mistake to have given them gold. He realized they would return again and again, wanting more. And others would come when they heard that there were both slaves and gold here.

Yes, he needed help, as did little Tibela. He needed the strength and knowledge of a strong man from the white man's world. The sailor, Scott, would have to be the answer. In the meantime, the gold that at one time his people had used to make ornaments was now bringing evil to his people. He now knew that it would be necessary to hide its source from all white men.

But more than all else, he needed a plan to save his tribe. He was now old and feeble and there was no one left to lead. Yes, only the white man from over the seas could help them now, as Tibela's father had done so many years ago. He must speak of this to the little princess herself. He smiled as he thought of her title. It was indeed rightfully hers—she was his great-granddaughter and he was the chief, and king of his people.

One of his warriors came silently out of the jungle path. "The princess returns," he said. "She will be in sight shortly. Our warriors have never let her out of their sight." He then turned and trotted back down the trail.

Princess Tibela was astride a beautiful sorrel mare with a creamy white flowing mane and white socks on her hind legs. Two warriors rode their ponies behind her. They were armed and alert. Following warily in the jungle trails were Indian warriors on foot, running ahead and following behind to see that no harm came to her.

As she rode, she looked over the vast acres covered with the growing sugarcane. She saw the grasslands where hundreds of cattle grazed under the watchful eyes of Indian workers.

Her grandfather had been a famous physician in Portugal, a Jew. When a plague broke out, he had been accused of poisoning the wells and would have been tortured by the inquisition and killed. He was helped to escape to Brazil and here he had taught the Indians his skills. In return they had given him their herbs and showed him their uses. The doctor had attended all who asked and helped them in their needs. He had settled here and built up these vast acres; cleared the land

and planted it. His wife had died and he had married an Indian princess and had a child, a son.

A shadow of pain showed in the depths of her eyes as she remembered the arrest of her father, mother, grandfather, and grandmother. Under guard, they had been sent to Portugal for trial. They had never returned and a marriage had been arranged for her. Gonzalo di Almagro had come from Portugal to become her husband. He had taken over the vast lands of her inheritance.

Over the years her family—grandfather and father—had always provided for the Indians in times of famine and given them lands for their village. She herself hired them to watch her cattle and horses and to process the vast acres of sugarcane. They had become the expert managers of her ranch. She attended their dances and celebrations and received their love and respect in return.

Now she rode up to the veranda of her house and dismounted. Her Indian servants were there to greet her. She handed the reins to the mounted men and gave them a smile of thanks for their company and protection. She stopped as she saw the elderly Chief Lamoni walking slowly toward her. She raised a hand in greeting and waited for him. As they seated themselves on the steps, the servants left them to their privacy.

At last Tibela spoke. "What brings the great chief of the village to my humble house?" She took his old wrinkled hand fondly in hers. His rheumy eyes looked affectionately into her own and he spoke in his own native dialect which she easily understood.

"I come to look upon the beauty of the little princess and to listen to the sweet sound of her voice. Also to see if she is happy and if there are things in which I can help her."

Tibela laughed softly at the old Indian's flattery. Then she replied soberly, "How fortunate I am to have such a true friend."

He smiled into her eyes and then asked a question. "How is the health of the white man with hair of fire?"

"He is still weak and much distressed at the loss of his leg. His wound will heal more quickly than the pain in his heart. He feels he cannot take his place among men. I feel sorry with him, for I know not how to ease his unhappiness."

The chief gazed off to the edge of the jungle and caught a glimpse of his warriors waiting to accompany him back to their village. Tibela put her hand out in supplication. "You are wise as to the hearts of men, my old friend. How can we help him?"

"The white man should be taken away, my daughter, before his enemies return to find him wounded and defenseless."

"This I know, but where can he go? Should I not take him into my home?"

"No, my child. It would soon be found out and questions asked. Word would go to the men of ships and they would return to kill him. He saw the unlawful capture of our people. I think his words would hang them."

"What are we to do then?" she asked, for she could see much danger for the man, Scott Bolinski. Until now she had only thought of the terrible loss of his leg and, in her pity, she had tried only to cheer him. Yet perhaps there were other reasons she wished to see him again, ones that her mind wished to deny but her heart acknowledged. Looking at the gaunt, emaciated man, though he was weak and helpless, she recognized his innate strength. More than pity and sympathy had stirred in her.

The chief strengthened his grip on her hand and silently waited before answering. Her attention returned to him. She asked again, showing her anxiety and fear for Scott. "What can we do? How can we hide him until he is ready to come back and take his place among men?"

He looked into her eyes and she thought what strength there was in this feeble old man. Strength not in his body but in his will and his character. She had heard many stories from her grandmother of his greatness in the field of battle and of his leadership. His people believed that he had talked with God and could tell of things to come.

Her attention was caught by his words. "We will take the man with the head of fire with us deep into the jungle. There our only enemies will be the leopard and the jungle cats. One day he will return to you, bringing back the old days when we were free from pirates and cannibals. He will protect you from evil men who want riches and your lands. Until that time, my daughter, keep my warriors at your side. They will be close by

and will guard you." With a farewell gesture, he rose and slowly made his way toward his waiting followers.

Tibela suddenly felt lonely and depressed. Then her little son came running toward her. She rose quickly, lifting him joyfully into the air to swing him around. Then she held him close to her heart.

The princess stood on the large veranda with her little son and gazed down the lane. In the past, beautiful carriages had come, carrying lovely perfumed ladies in their brightly colored dresses. Male visitors were puffed up with their titles and their privileges, and wore silver singing spurs and jeweled daggers. They rode prancing horses, groomed and polished and adorned. It had been the grandeur of an earlier colonial day. Would it ever return? She looked at her child with concern. What did the future hold for him? And what did it hold for her?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Scott arose at first morning's light. His body was wet from the oppressive heat and the pain in his leg. He sat on the edge of his straw bunk and reached for the crutch that Jens had made for him. It was just out of reach and he had to stand on his one leg, and grasp a nearby stool until he could take hold of the support. He was reluctant to be seen this way, hobbling along with his leg hanging useless, a curiosity.

Leaving his shanty, he started along the trail, pausing to watch a formation of high-flying ducks. The skies shone blue through the high canopy of the trees. Monkeys were darting among the high limbs and he could hear their scolding chatter. He filled his lungs with the fresh moist air. It not only expanded his chest, but also broadened his thoughts.

It was good to be alive after all, he thought. He inhaled and exhaled several times until he felt a ringing in his ears and his blood raced through his veins. Then Scott moved onto the trail that pointed like a finger into the jungle. His eyes caught a movement—a man on a burro? He was puzzled until, through an opening in the dense growth, he saw a young woman of

about twenty. She was bent over and carried a priest on her back. His mouth dropped open with surprise. Never had he seen such a sight. It was at once humorous and pitiful. He stood to one side as they passed. The pair did not see him and he moved to stand in the shadows of the looming trees at the edge of the village.

The girl was apparently a well-known sight in the village. The Indians knew she was serving out a penance. They watched fearfully as Roseanna knelt and helped the priest to the ground. From beneath his filthy robes, his broken, disfigured, and helpless legs were revealed. The natives dreaded his visits for they felt he could see into their very souls, that before him, their sins were as words written on a paper. He had told them that his guardian angel carried a razor-sharp sword that would destroy those who did not heed his words.

Now his accusing eyes swept over the village, into the shadows, finding Scott's silent figure. The Indians moaned softly as each felt that he was the victim of the terrible glance. The clergyman pointed a bony clawlike finger at Scott. "That man must leave your camp. I came when I heard that he was here. Great punishment and sorrow will come to you and snakes will rain down unless he leaves at once. He is one of those who crucified our Lord."

There was a low murmur of fear and a few angry voices were heard. Chief Lamoni raised his hand to them and they became quiet. "The roof of my house is the sky." He pointed his withered finger to the towering trees above them. "All those who come under my roof are welcome." He smiled reassuringly at Scott.

"Hah," shouted the priest. "This Jew will harm you. He will meet in secret with other Jews." He took an iron cross from his pocket and held it high above his head. His hands swept before the Indians and he looked up into the trees as he shouted, "This is the land of the cross. All those working their evil magic must be driven away, for they are bad."

"All men are bad," muttered the girl.

"Quiet," the priest ordered. Turning his eyes to Jens the old man thundered, "This man must go also, for he too is bad."

Jens rose to his feet to protest, but Scott faced the priest,

standing so that his voice could be heard by the Indians. "I will tell you what is good. A man and his family, with love and laughter. That is good."

There was a nod of approval from old Chief Lamoni. He translated so that each of his people understood. Hardly had he finished when the cleric thundered, "That is a carnal belief and thus it is evil. It will destroy your soul and will damn you to eternal fires."

Scott's voice rose. "What I have said stands true. Evil tears families apart. Love is good—hatred destroys."

The natives looked back and forth from Scott to the priest and back to their chief. They were confused and afraid. Their superstitious fears were deep and the magnetic threat of the half-mad, emaciated old man with the fire in his eyes and the commanding voice touched them deeply. These were baptized Indians and they could not turn lightly away.

The old chief felt helpless. The pirates were killing his people and taking them for slaves. The cannibals were raiding his villages and kidnapping young boys and girls. Now this priest was bringing curses. He no longer had the strength to lead his people, and without strong leadership they would become victims of slavery, or worse.

Scott could see the old chief's helplessness. "We do not wish to bring troubles to you and your people, chief. God is the Father of us all. My friend and I will leave the village and thus appease the bearers of the cross. We shall be close by, for our wish is to help you, not hurt you."

The chief ordered horses to be brought and Scott and Jens mounted. Scott was relieved that his leg gave him no discomfort. Supplies and Scott's crutch were fastened to a pack mule. The chief ordered four of his young warriors to guard them down the path. Scott glanced back over his shoulder and saw that the villagers had returned to their meal. Their God was satisfied and now they would not be under a curse. It was right that the cause of their problem should leave them.

By noon the old priest had departed and Jens and Scott rejoined the chief. They talked of how the land could be cleared and cane planted. It was fertile—suitable for crops. There was abundant water and sunshine. Scott felt the stirrings of a desire for land. As a boy, he had seen the vast acres

belonging to his grandfather in Russia, near Voronezh. There was bred in him the desire to work his own soil. Though this land had been thus far filled with misfortune for him, with his returning strength he was able to envision how it could give him a fruitful life and a happy future.

After lunch the chief lay stretched out upon the grass while his Indians did the camp chores. Scott came to sit down beside him and asked, "Can you tell me about the priest?"

"I have heard his story. He was born in Spain of distinguished parents. As a young man, he showed a brilliance of mind. His mother, a widow, encouraged him to direct his abilities toward the Church. Following his ordination, he got several degrees from the university. Then he became involved with a woman.

"She was very beautiful and he fell victim to her charms. Later, he went voluntarily to the torture chambers and submitted to the breaking of his legs on the wheel that he might receive his penance. After that blinding pain, he was sent here where he has been working for over forty years. Other priests have been more successful in their conversions, but none is so feared. He is half-mad and my people know this and fear it as the very devil. That is why he travels safely where others fear to go."

"What about the girl who cares for him? She is obviously a white woman," Scott asked.

The chief nodded. "You have seen him with her. He condemned her as a whore and pronounced an eternal curse on her unless she did this penance. She is devout and agreed to it. For three moons now she has carried him on the paths to the native villages."

There was silence following the chief's story. Jens finally rose, went to their supplies and took out a wooden leg. He brought it over to Scott. "Let's shape this for you, lad. I have done all that I can until I have seen if it will fit."

Scott reached for it with a questioning look. Though his wound had not completely healed, he eagerly took hold of it and tried to fit it to the still-tender stump. Perhaps now he could move around without the crutch.

The Indians stopped working to watch as Scott threw himself forward on his good leg and awkwardly got to his feet. He felt

like he was on a storm-tossed ship and the pain on the tender stump was yet too great to bear his full weight.

"Scotty, I made it for you to kneel on. The few inches of leg below your knee won't be in the way. Try, man." Jens moved to help Scott adjust to a more comfortable position.

Scott took a tentative step and the tall grass tangled with the unfamiliar limb. He fell flat. Jens jumped to take his arm, but Scott brushed his hand away, though his face tensed with effort. He got to his feet again with the aid of the crutch and began to walk awkwardly about. In a few minutes, he tossed the crutch aside and began to take steps and then turns—more and more effortlessly.

At last Jens leaned back with a big smile as he watched his friend gain confidence. Scott looked smilingly at Jens as he sat down beside him. He extended his hand saying, "Thanks, friend."

Jens slapped him on the back as Scott moved to lay on the warm grass. Exuberantly, he thought that at least his muscles responded. He had had the living fear that he would be tied forever to a stick of wood. His glance went to the crutch. Now he could walk upright like a man—awkwardly, it was true, but soon his muscles would become conditioned to this new effort and then he would be able to move more smoothly and quickly.

"Don't overdo, lad. Blisters or leg cramps won't help," Jens advised, but he, too, lay beside Scott in excited joy. He had spent many long hours, with only a hand knife, to produce this surprise. With the help of native craftsmen, he had made a brass tip for the end. When Scott learned to use it, the leg could be an effective weapon. He had seen it often.

Scott rose and walked around again. He only sat down when his food was brought by grinning Indians. While he was eating, he examined the warriors' bows and arrows. With his pleasant and encouraging manner, the natives began to exhibit their skills. One drew a circle on the ground a few feet from where their watchers sat. He notched an arrow and shot it straight up into the air. Jens and Scott looked questioningly at the smiling chief for it was metal-tipped and could kill. Then, with a "swoosh," the missile came down and buried itself deep in the center of the circle.

Jens and Scott marveled at this marksmanship and the Indian

showed his strong white teeth in a smile of satisfaction. He had performed this feat many times, but it was pleasing to find someone new to witness and appreciate his marksmanship.

"Jens is the best cannoneer on the high seas," Scott explained to the old chief, "so he is excited to find a kindred marksman."

For the next few hours everything was forgotten as the Indians showed Scott and Jens their weaponry and then taught them their use.

At last the old chief beckoned Scott to ride alone with him without Jens or the guards. They disappeared into the forest.

Chief Lamoni was silent as he and Scott rode up the trail. Great towering trees were covered with climbing vines that trailed onto the ground and nearly choked out the trail. Scott was alert and he looked around with interest as the monkeys chattered excitedly and birds of many shapes and colors glided through the air with piercing cries. Occasional sprinkles of water gathered on the leaves and dropped about them. Scott was astride a horse with a fast, steady walk. He rode comfortably and watched the chief—marveling at him. No one seemed to know how old he was, but he was wrinkled as a dried-out plum and his skin was nearly as dark. He sat erect in the saddle, carrying a pistol, an ancient sword, and a bow and arrow on the cantle of his saddle.

They had been riding for about an hour when they reached a summit topping an open space with a few smooth stones protruding above the grass. The chief slowly dismounted from his horse and bade Scott to do the same.

Though it was awkward for Scott, he managed. The chief had walked some distance and stood looking out over the forest. It stretched to the far shores of the Amazon River. Suddenly the chief drew his sword, turned, swung it around, and lashed out at Scott. The blade flashed in the hot sunlight and the sailor leaped backward, tripped, and fell. The chief came toward him aggressively with raised sword and a downward swing that could end Scott's life.

The chief's hand stopped in midair. "Let's try that again," he said quietly. "You were unprepared and it would have meant your death had I been your enemy."

Scott rolled over and rose to his feet, his heart pounding. He was sure that he looked pale with fright and was certainly astonished.

"One thing more, my son. Never approach anyone without your hand on your blade ready for instant use. The occasion may arise when you will need it quickly. I'll walk forward with my back to you as I did before and you follow me again."

Scott was already familiar with that basic practice, but had relaxed with the old man because he was a friend. His pounding heart slowed and he realized the value of practice such as this. He felt that he would now be more alert and better able to protect himself. Confidently he walked forward, but this time the chief swung in the opposite direction. Instead of slashing, he ran forward with his sword pointing directly at Scott's broad chest.

Scott had his sword out, but to avoid getting run through, he took a quick sideward step. Though he balanced his blade, his wooden leg caught in the high grass and again he landed on his back. The chief charged and chopped with his blade and Scott's only defense was his peg leg. Now the tough wood that Jens had used withstood each slash of the chief's blade.

The old warrior paused for breath and the younger man rolled to his feet, his sword ready for another charge. Sampson, his Greek tutor, had not neglected Scott's schooling in the art of swordsmanship and he was capable of holding his own in any company if he could keep his feet under him.

The chief at last dropped his guard and sat to rest under a tree. "For the next few weeks, you will practice with my young warriors. I am too old for this kind of work." His mahogany-colored face cracked in a brief smile. "But it was necessary for me to get you started. Practice is all that you need. Now you can let your mind move forward to become accustomed to your condition. You will develop skills you never had before. Use your leg to advantage."

Scott smiled. How wise this old man was, to bring him out here where there was no one to see his awkwardness. Now he was eager to meet and parry with the young men of the village. He had been well-trained in the arts of European warfare, but the loss of his leg had shattered his confidence. Now he knew

he could hold his own among men. It would take only practice and patience.

"Come sit with me, my son. We have important matters to discuss." Scott stripped the saddles from their horses and then sat down beside the old man. They watched the jaw muscles of the horses as they chewed some vines and Scott thought that the chief was set for a long talk. He stretched out full length in the grass and watched the white billowing clouds high in the sky.

"The peacefulness that you feel, my son, is but an illusion. The earth around is filled with threat from both man, beast and even earth itself. People close to us are suffering unto death, even at this very moment. There are but brief moments of peace and during those precious moments, the time taken to enjoy them could mean your death. Most of my life has been one of survival. Men take my people captive to be sold as slaves. Our girls and women are raped and tortured. We are followed by men who are worse than the beasts of the forests, for they would eat us. We have come at last to the sea and we must stand and fight—for there is no other place for us to hide.

"Princess Tibela's grandfather and father gave us protection and we worked in their fields. We learned the white man's ways to help ourselves. For a time, we prospered and enjoyed a time of peace." The old chief paused in contemplation, then continued. "But after her family was taken to the land beyond the seas, they never returned and we were again exposed. The princess has tried to follow her grandfather's plan, but she was given in marriage to a man who lacked wisdom. He was no match for the cunning of men or the wilderness of this country."

He paused again before continuing. "The most evil of all, Dominick Plehve, is now ready to take all of her properties. He wishes to force her into yet another unhappy marriage. Though that would secure her home he would certainly exploit her property and leave my people defenseless against his slave connections."

The old man reached for a blade of grass and put it in his mouth to chew for a moment. Scott lay motionless, waiting for the rest of the story. "Money was borrowed by Tibela's

husband, Gonzalo di Almagro. It was planned to bring the princess to ruin.

The old chief leaned forward and looked Scott in the eyes. "Now, my son, our only hope lies in you. I wish you to help us—help my people to protect themselves—and secure her property for Princess Tibela. We have many fine young warriors, but our leaders have been taken as slaves or been killed. I am too old and my experience was in another time. You can train us to become strong—train us against our enemies. Even if the princess loses her land, we will again push back the jungle, defeat the cannibals and establish ourselves as a people of pride."

Shaken by this challenge, Scott lay for long moments without speaking. The old chief spoke again. "You were led here to this time and place, my son. It is your destiny. Accept it."

Scott rolled over and sat up. At last he reached out to grip the chief's hand, answering quietly. "Yes, I accept it. I am humbled by your trust and confidence. You and the princess have saved my life. In another time, my life would be yours. But now, in whatever way I can, I will help. My grandfather and father were great warriors in Russia and I have learned many things from a Greek warrior, Sampson. But I must tell you that I have had battle experience only at sea. My family has wealth. It will take some time, but my resources are yours. Perhaps we can help the Princess Tibela with money. I have inherited great strength and I know the use of weapons, including a cannon that is hidden not far from here."

The chief gave Scott a brief smile. "Your first concern will be the safety of our Princess Tibela and her child."

"How many of your men can be trained to fight?"

The old chief stood up and looked to the far horizon. "Less than a hundred of the kind you require. We have many more who are ten years and younger. They make up for their lack of size by their hatred and eagerness. There are young women whose lives are in constant danger and they too wish to help. All of our youthful fighters are expert horsemen and have been taught to use the bows and arrows and blowguns of our ancestors."

"Are your horses trained for battle?" Scott asked.

"A few. But most have been used only for work with the

princess' cows." Suddenly the old chief held up his hand for silence.

Scott froze. He too had heard the striking of a hoof against stone. They both grabbed their saddles and blankets, running silently to their horses to draw them back into the undergrowth. Swiftly they saddled and bridled their mounts and had their weapons in their hands ready for use.

A small raiding party of cannibals came into view through the dense covering of leaves. A lead horse was followed by several children tied by their necks to one another and then to the horse. The youngsters must be obedient or they would be quickly strangled. If the horse bolted, the children would be dragged to their deaths.

The marching cannibals were small and thin and wore only breechcloths. Their faces were painted with white chalk and their ears were pierced and hung with large ornaments. They carried long spears, in addition to bows and arrows slung across their backs. Sharply honed knives hung from their belts. Certainly, thought Scott, they were a fierce-looking group. As they were about to pass, their leader held up his hand, pointing to cropped grass and horse droppings. There was low excited talking from the warriors. The cannibals were about to run for cover when the old chief's arrow found the leader. The next killed a savage leading the lead horse. The horse had fortunately been trained to stand when the lead rope was on the ground and he did not bolt. Scott withheld his pistol fire so the animal would not be frightened. He also did not want to alert other enemies who might be close by. He drew his sword and charged to meet the remaining men.

Fear left the cannibals when they saw only one old man and a one-legged cripple. They rushed to meet the charge. Scott walked into the group with his sword slashing and two men dropped to the ground. A third raised a spear to Scott's back when an arrow found his heart. Chief Lamoni could not match these warriors in hand-to-hand combat, but as the remaining cannibals turned to flee, he sent another arrow that stopped one in mid-stride. Scott quickly pulled a spear from a dead man's hand and it found its mark in the back of the last savage.

The children were weeping with fright as Chief Lamoni and Scott released them from their bonds. One threw herself into

Scott's arms, her brown cheeks stained with tears. It was a little girl from the village.

"Where are the priest and the woman?" the chief asked.

"Chief Puka has them at his village," was the answer.

"Puka is the worst of the Xingo cannibal leaders," the chief explained quietly.

"Will the priest and the woman be safe in his camp?"

"The flesh of a white priest is highly prized by the cannibals. They smoke it and save it for special occasions. They feel that it brings them the power of God."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Judge Dominick Plehve licked gravy from his tapered fingers. A servant handed him a napkin and he delicately wiped his face, neck, and fingers. The servant then removed the napkin and, covering the remains on the tray, picked it up carefully and silently left the room. Another servant stepped forward with a goblet, filling it with wine from a glass decanter.

Dom's clerk now came forward and placed several papers before him. He read and then signed the first and handed it back. The clerk accepted it with lowered head and a slight bow. He read the second sheet and slapped the paper down with a loud "whack," shoving it aside. It upset a large uncovered inkwell, which tipped over, spreading a dark stain on the far side of the desk and down onto the thick Persian carpet that covered the floor. His chair flew over backwards as he rose angrily to his feet. The judge backhanded his clerk across the mouth, and went down on his knees to dab at the ink with his own handkerchief. The clerk's face was ashen. Dom gave him a raging look but said nothing about the incident. He stabbed a ringed forefinger at the hapless man saying, "I gave

instructions that the Widow di Almagro was not to be evicted until I gave the word."

"Your most honorable sir, the bank just sent these papers over," replied the clerk timidly.

He was dismissed and left, dabbing blood from the corner of his mouth. Dominick Plehve sat back in his chair. There were cases to be heard and judged. First, however, he would have to calm himself. He was a ruthless and heartless administrator of justice. But his powers were limited to civil matters and his lust for dictatorship was controlled by the hated captain-general—Captain-General Manuel de Souza, who was responsible only to the sovereign. The fellow was an arrogant popinjay with no sense of discipline, Dom thought contemptuously. The man had no right to hold authority.

He rose and went to his office window, watching the heavy cargo ships being loaded at the docks. He calculated his profits when they arrived in his homeland, Portugal. A ship was due in with mail and supplies and he searched the far horizon for sight of it. He looked out over the city, seeing the hundreds of acres of cleared and planted lands. As always he hungered for the profitable sugar cane crop, planted by the Jews and worked by the Indians. He intended to own these lands one day. He turned impatiently away. His fury knew no bounds when he permitted himself the realization that he was nearing fifty years of age and was still only a local administrator. He kept the position only because it gave him opportunities for personal intrigue and gain.

Dominick was an illegitimate ward of the House of Braganza. He had been one of John the Fifth's favorites and had rooms in the great Mafra Palace. He remembered, with pleasure and regret, the delightful hours he had spent there. Then he had been deported and forced to live here in a position not suitable to his many talents. He had been stupid enough to overstep himself in the pursuit of a married woman of the court and, by firm persuasion, he had been hustled aboard a ship in the dark of night. He had landed in this colony of Brazil.

And now there was this matter of the bank foreclosure of Tibela di Almagro's property. He rose to his feet and paced across the room. The gold brocaded sofa caught the glow of the sun. The walls were covered with weapons of war. He was

master of all, including the dart gun and the bows and arrows of the Amazon. He had spent hours perfecting his skill. The light played on a rapier that lay across his huge desk. No one equalled his skill in the whole of Brazil—or Portugal, for that matter.

Dominick was tall and slender, with silky black hair curled just to his shoulders and a few gray hairs that were just beginning to show. His beard was neat and trim, his lips full, his nose hawkish. The eyes were set well into their sockets and seemed to be smoldering with strong unbridled emotion. He stopped and picked up the paper from the desk.

He wanted Tibela di Almagro with a passion that he had never felt for a woman, but she still expected her husband's return. Her marriage had been arranged and her husband twice her age. She had never loved him, Dom felt, but all of his own attempts to seduce her had failed.

Dominick knew that her husband was dead. He had arranged it with Puka, the cannibal chief, who had been paid for taking him. Fearing a double-cross, he had given payment only after the shrunken head had been delivered. That was the work of the Jivaros, Puka's neighboring headshrinkers.

Dom's face momentarily lit with a smile as he reflected how Tibela would react if he were to show her the head of her husband. He went to the closet at the end of his room and unlocked a massive door. He removed a wrapped package and opened it to look into the face of Gonzalo di Almagro. It was small enough to hold between his two hands. Gonzalo had purported to be Portuguese, but Dom was sure that he was also a Jew. He marveled at how the Jivaro natives could so skillfully shrink a human head. He turned it in his hands, smoothed the hair down, then wrapped it and placed it again into the closet. He looked at the brass buttons from Captain Bogaart's coat that the pirate, Captain Gann, had brought him.

Gann had said there were no survivors from the ship, but he had heard rumor of a white man in the village. He would have to check that out. If it were even discovered that he had had any part in the illegal slave traffic, Captain-General Manuel de Souza would hang him and any help from the crown would come too late. He returned to the paper of foreclosure and considered how best to use it on Tibela.

He had the customary mulatto mistresses, but he needed a white wife. She would provide him with prestige among the influential residents who were suspicious of him as a bachelor with a whispered reputation. Tibela must be the one, and nothing would stop his wishes in this matter.

Unfortunately she was well-protected while living at the hacienda with her young son. Her slaves were loyal and the Indians accepted her as their princess. The coppery tint to her exquisite skin could possibly be traced to an Indian ancestor, he thought. Unfortunately for his purposes, she rarely came to town, and then only for a day's shopping.

Dom had found an opportunity to propose marriage, assuring her that it was seemly, since a year had passed since her husband's disappearance. She was unresponsive to his courtesies, but now, perhaps, there was another way. If she were dispossessed and without home, lands and funds, he could have her on his own terms. She would go to him on her knees, begging for protection and care. But no, he reflected, he could not see that happen under any circumstances. She was proud and, under strain, haughty. But he would find a way and then he would show her what love and passion could be.

The noise in the outer office grew louder and he was late for the court session. It was the clerk's fault. He looked at the inkstain on his carpet and uttered an oath. As he moved past his desk, he grasped the handle of his rapier in his right hand and, with his left hand behind his back, struck a fencing pose. Then he reached out and touched his unseen opponent's sword. With incredible speed, he thrust and parried. He thrilled as he simulated the feeling of cold steel slicing through the chest of an adversary. He had lost count of those he had killed and now, as he moved about the room like a tiger, his body responded to the game. The exercise brought a sheen of sweat to his face and his hair and beard became damp. He laid the sword gently across his desk. Tomorrow he would call on his military acquaintances to have some practice in swordsmanship, though none could match his skill.

He left the room and went to the adjoining chambers where he took his place on the judge's stand. The clerk was there, as were those to be heard and judged. Dom was contemptuous of

these people for they were here for minor offences. Regrettably, the serious crimes were tried by the captain-general.

Two hours later Dom Plehve was given a whispered message by his clerk. He rose and left the courtroom, going immediately to his private office. He glanced out of his window as he shed his robe. Yes, the supply ship, the *Empresa*, was in. He had need hurry to be on hand for its landing. His servant had ordered his coach to wait; it had better be there. He fastened on his sword belt, thrust his rapier into the fine scabbard, and shoved his pistol into the belt under his silver-brocaded vest. A servant held up his jacket of crimson damask lined with silk. It was too hot for a wig. He set his gold-laced beaver hat upon his head and demanded, "Is my coach ready?"

"I will see, sir," the servant replied meekly.

"I can see for myself, you oaf!" Dom shoved the man roughly aside and strode toward the door and down the stairs to the street. His carriage was indeed there, but so was Yvonne, his mulatto mistress. She was being carried on a sedan chair by four stalwart black slaves. She raised her hand to her lover. Guiltily, he remembered that he had asked her to have luncheon with him.

Impatiently, he invited her into his carriage and they moved quickly into the busy traffic of the street. Urchins raced in droves toward the dock and a Jesuit priest passed holding his skirts up as he hurried by. Peddlers, businessmen, and soldiers all pressed on to greet the three-masted sailing vessel inching her way toward the dock. The police had roped off an area to be kept clear for disembarking passengers, but Dom and his mistress were recognized and immediately allowed to pass the barrier.

Captain-General Manuel de Souza was already there with an honor guard. He gave a coldly formal salute to Dom and a bow to the mulatto woman at his side. The judge was suspicious when the two exchanged knowing glances. It was something to look into, he thought. Women under his roof belonged to him and him alone. His hand went to his rapier with the thought. The captain-general noticed the gesture and expression and gave Dom an amused glance.

Lines were tossed to the waiting deckhands. Remaining sails

were lowered and orders shouted by the captain's mate from the deck. A band had arrived and music filled the air with festive sounds of celebration.

The ship settled smoothly against the dock and a great cheer went up from the waiting crowds. Friends shouted to one another in a carnival spirit. The gangplank was lowered and another cheer went up. The crowd pressed against the rope barrier. Red-faced police were becoming angered by their futile efforts to hold the laughing crowd back. The ship's crew came to attention as the captain made his appearance and the official party, consisting of the captain-general and his guard, followed by Dom Plehve, was piped aboard. They officially welcomed the captain and his ship to port.

The music stopped and the crowd quieted. They all wanted to see and hear the official greeting from their Portuguese king and country.

Yvonne watched the men walk up to the waiting captain. The thought occurred to her that Dom was tiring of her. She recognized the signs, but she was tired of him, too. He was a vicious man, in and out of bed. Yet now she felt excitement, for she had seen interest in the eyes of the captain-general. The man had a gentleman's reputation and she would welcome that for a change. Yes, she would drop Dom before he dropped her. It would help her maintain a semblance of dignity.

The crowd was disappointed and their voices rose in protest as the ship's captain, the captain-general, and Dom Plehve left the deck to go below. But their spirits rose as the first mate led the officers and crew down the runway. The mob finally burst past the sweating policemen to greet the visitors.

The band struck up a lively tune and children jumped up and down trying to see over the heads of those in front of them.

Captain Ignacio Pinilla led the official party to his quarters and gestured the two men to chairs as he took off his cap and unbuttoned his tight velvet collar. A sextant sat in its place on a stand and maps and charts covered the table. These were the brains of the ship and there were no frills. He set out glasses and poured stiff drinks. Moving to his desk, he removed a packet of papers, and laid one of them before the captain-general.

"Read it, sir," he said.

The captain-general did so, then looked firmly at Dom before handing him the paper. "It seems you have some unfinished business in Lisbon, sir, and the king has summoned you back." Dom sat stiffly in his chair. Sweat glistened on his forehead and the veins of his neck swelled and throbbed with the rapid beat of his heart as he read on:

"Dominick Plehve must go on trial for sword play that ended in the death of the duc's son, a lad reportedly unfamiliar with arms. It occurred while he was a guest of the king. There is also the matter of a sworn statement by a young woman companion of the boy."

The captain drained his glass, as did the captain-general. Dom's hands became like talons and began to rip the message in two.

"None of that, sir. That message has the king's seal upon it." The captain-general took hold of the document and stared steadily into Dom's eyes. It took a moment before the judge could gain his self-control. He then rose to his feet and shouted, "It's all lies, lies, lies! It was a fair duel! The boy insulted me. I would have waived the whole affair, but he insisted that his honor be satisfied. As to the girl, she came to me willingly." Dom's lips were white as he glanced at the two men.

"She has said that she came to you only to save the young man's life. They were guests of the crown and thus you must return to stand trial," the captain said as he turned to the captain-general. "I will take him back with me when I sail. Until then, he is in your custody."

"How long do you think that will be?" the captain-general asked.

"Sir, it will be one month. The *Empresa* must have minor repairs and be refitted with supplies." He handed the captain-general an official document with the king's seal on it. "This is your copy and directive. You will deliver him to my custody on the day of my departure."

Captain de Souza turned to Dom and requested that he hand over his weapons. Plehve was like a man gone mad. His eyes smoldered and his hands trembled as he slowly unsheathed his rapier. Then, in a flash, its needle-sharp point was leveled at the captain-general's throat. The official paled as he saw the

implacable madness in Dom's eyes. Slowly the point was lowered and the rapier tossed upon the table.

"Gentlemen," said Pinilla, "let us proceed to the deck. There is no need to cause Senor Plehve unnecessary embarrassment by calling the guard now. However, once on land, he is not my responsibility." The three men left the captain's quarters and joined the honor guard that was standing at attention.

Dom and the captain-general took a coach back to military headquarters. The captain broke the silence. "I will do all I can to make your confinement at the garrison as comfortable as possible."

"I'll ask no favors, nor will I expect any, but I demand the right to continue my judicial duties until the boat sails. In that way, I can leave my work in proper order for the man succeeding me."

"I have no choice in this matter and neither do you, Plehve. My orders are explicit. You are to be confined until sailing time, when you will be placed in the custody of the ship's captain."

Dom had slipped a pistol into his hand and he now turned and pressed it into the captain-general's side. "There *is* another choice, my friend. You can do as I say or you can die right here. I have nothing to lose now, for I am a dead man if I return to Portugal for trial."

The captain-general felt the firm barrel of the pistol and knew that Dom would not hesitate to kill him. He must obey until a more favorable moment arose to overpower his prisoner.

Dom spoke between rigid lips. "We will go first to my office. Tell the driver." The captain did so, regretting that he had sent his honor guard ahead to the garrison. However, he would soon be missed and a search initiated.

It was late afternoon when they reached the courthouse and only the night watchman was present. Dom paid the driver and dismissed him. He then forced the captain-general to enter his chambers. "Sit here, captain. I'm going to tie and gag you. I'm sure that you will agree—or I will kill you. The choice is yours. It matters nothing to me either way." He pointed to a chair and

quickly pulled a golden strand of rope from the purple velvet drapes that bordered the window, binding his capture securely.

Dom then unlocked the closet door and brought out a chest, to which he added several small sacks of gold and silver coins from his desk. He glanced out of the window and could see a number of ships tied up at the docks. It had only been a few hours since he had looked through this same window, but in that short time, how his fortunes had changed! He uttered a virulent stream of curses.

He stood for a moment, contemplating his plan of action. Perhaps it would work out better this way in the long run. He was certainly bored sitting here day after day, wasting time and energy. He longed for action, for the open sea, with his own ship under his feet, his own men to direct. Well, nothing would stop him now. He needed only time and luck. He took out his ink-stained handkerchief, and stuffed it into his prisoner's mouth.

The captain-general carefully controlled his breathing, for the gag was far back in his throat and if he were not careful, it could choke him to death. He was seething that Dominick had so easily captured him. This was not only an embarrassment, but a danger. His own life would be forfeited if a prisoner of the crown escaped. This had been made clear by the ship's captain and spelled out in the king's orders. It was too late now—he was helpless! But after he was released, he would recapture Dominick Plehve. He was sure he could accomplish that easily, for where could the man hide? He could not go up the Amazon—that was certain death. He could not legally go to sea except with pirates, and that was improbable.

Dom tipped back the captain-general's chair, dragging it across the carpet and pulling it into the closet. Without a further word, he shut and locked the door putting the key into his pocket.

He walked boldly into the street, carrying his treasure chest to the coach. He spoke softly to the driver, ordering him to ride with much haste to his personal stable at the edge of the town.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The crippled black boy, Feijao, was dumb, but his eyes were bright and sharp as a razor and he had ears like an owl. He could hear the slightest sound. He pointed and Berko, the stable manager, stepped out into the fading sunlight and, shielding his eyes with his hand, stared down the street where the boy had pointed. There was a cloud of dust and, as he watched, a team of sweating horses emerged, followed by a carriage.

There was no slack in the reins as the coachman controlled the racing horses. Berko caught a glimpse of Dominick Plehve's face. The black boy had already risen and dragged himself back into the shadows of the barn. He entered an empty box-stall and painfully closed the door. Berko wished to get out of sight too, for he detested Dom Plehve and knew that there was sure to be trouble.

The horses were set back in the traces as the coachman pulled up sharply with little regard for their tender mouths.

"Berko, you stable bum," yelled Dom as he leaped out of the carriage. "Get over here and take out this chest." He

slapped a coin into the coachman's outstretched hand and, with a curse, sent him on his way.

Berko lifted the heavy chest and Dom shoved him along impatiently as they entered the stable alley. Dom stared down the street as though he expected pursuit. He turned back to the sullen Berko and barked, "Take that chest and hide it under the hay in the loft. Hurry it up, man."

Berko stumbled up the stairs that led to the loft. There was a sweet smell of hay and shafts of sunlight penetrated through the cracks to give a dim light to the windowless room. He set the chest on the floor and stared at it, his curiosity aroused. He heard a board creak and turned to gaze into the penetrating eyes of Dom Plehve.

"Get that box under cover! I'll send for it tonight—or as soon as I can. You'll forfeit your life if it has been touched! Now, get my mare, and quickly. I have no time to waste."

The two men descended the stairs and Berko went to the rear box-stall, quickly leading out Dom's mare. As he brought out the currycomb, brush, and bridle, the judge snapped, "I've no time for that nonsense. Brush the horse on your own time, not mine."

Dom strapped on his spurs, the rowels long and sharp. The mare was nervous at the sound, remembering previous rides. Dom gripped the reins in his left hand and took hold of the saddle horn. Before mounting, he turned to Berko again. "Remember, you fool, if you value your life, don't let that chest out of your sight. When my messenger comes, he will be wearing this ring." Dom held a flashing deep-blue sapphire close to Berko's eyes and the brilliant stone caught the reflection of sunlight from an open archway. The stone looked alive, like the living eye of a deadly serpent, thought Berko.

"He will have this ring," Dom repeated. He placed his feet in the stirrups and charged out of the stable onto the road and headed toward the country. The sides of the mare began to show red welts from the cruel spurs.

Little Feijao was terrified. He hoped that Berko had forgotten him. He lay against the plank wall of the stall and cupped his hands over his mouth to soften his breathing. Through a crack in the planks, he had seen the stable hand

carry the chest to the loft and his keen ears had heard all that was said.

Berko went to his tackroom, his mind awl with the events of the past few minutes. He, too, was terrified of Dom, and yet he had a nagging curiosity about the chest. It was certainly a treasure of some kind. Dom Plehve had been in a panic, a mood much different than his usual anger. It was trouble, Berko was sure of it and he wondered who was after Dom. His eyes searched the street that led into the city. He was about to turn away when he caught the sight of dust and stayed to watch. It was the military, a small patrol of soldiers from the garrison. He stepped back out of sight. No good could come from these men. They came at a slow gallop and a sergeant rode forward alone to the stable entrance.

"Hello inside," he called out.

Berko thought there was no point in hiding, for they would find him anyway. He stepped into the bright sunlight. "Hello," he said, as though surprised to see them.

The officer gave a friendly salute. "I am looking for the captain-general and Dominick Plehve. Have you seen either of them?"

Berko had anticipated this question, for these men meant trouble. He pondered what to do. If he helped the soldiers and Dominick Plehve were taken, perhaps he could keep the treasure chest for himself. But if he denied seeing Dom and they discovered that he had been lying—he shuddered at the thought of the garrison's gallows.

"I have not seen the captain-general, sir, but Dominick Plehve was here and took his mare. He rode off in that direction," he said, pointing East.

"Was he in a hurry?"

"Yes, but the senor is always in a hurry."

"Your name is Berko, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"I think it would be well for you to come with us back to the city. The captain-general may want to ask you a few questions. It shouldn't take long and you will be back in time to feed your stock. I'll wait while you saddle a horse."

Berko was sweating. The day was hot, but this was the sweat of fear and frustration. *I knew there would be trouble when I*

saw *Dominick Plehve* coming, he thought, walking toward the stable to saddle a horse.

Captain Gann, the pirate leader, and two of his crew had watched Dominick board the Portuguese ship. He knew Plehve was expecting to receive riches, not problems. The pirate chuckled to himself as he imagined the judge's anger. The last voyage had been a disaster, for salvage of the Dutch ship had not amounted to much. The trade goods were ruined, soaked in seawater. A few kegs of powder, seven swivel guns, handcuffs, shackles, and a pair of blunderbusses were saved. That second leg of the triangular trade route had been the worst he'd had in many trips. This leg to the West Indies was where the trouble had begun. Twenty-two slaves had died before the passage commenced. One, a female, had hung herself. And more deaths had occurred at sea. It had been a bad trip all around. No, Dom Plehve would not be happy.

He watched the passengers and crew disembark. Then the pirates walked into the shadows of the warehouse to wait for Dom's appearance. They were anxious to quench their thirst and were getting nervous.

"There he is," said Swede.

Captain Gann watched alertly for a moment, then said, "We'll get a carriage and follow. As soon as he's alone, we can talk business."

The pirates observed Dom and the captain-general step from their vehicle and enter the judicial building. It was late afternoon and most of the workers had left. A bank, occupying a corner of the building, was still open and Captain Gann wondered briefly how much cash might be on hand. While waiting, he took from his pocket a paper giving an account of his last voyage. He wondered again if he should mention the white man, William. No, he'd better leave that out. He reread the entry:

"April 24, 1734. Slaves rose on us. Obligated to fire on them. I destroyed ten. Several more wounded badly. Pulled into cove by Indian village. Picked up 47 Indians to fill out the load. Sailed to Antigua. Because of deaths and poor condition, sold only 24 at 17 pounds each.

There were 116 deaths. Loss for the voyage—500 pounds.”

“Captain, it’s hot. Let’s grab a pint or two. I’m dying of thirst.” Swede was angry and the captain knew when to give in.

“You boys go across the street. There’s drinks to be had at the corner. Don’t take too long and bring me a draft.”

“Where’s the money?” asked Swede. “It’s been all work and no pay and too many promises.”

“You’ll be getting plenty before long,” the captain assured him.

The men gave each other an unhappy look. They were used to their captain’s promises. However, they took his suggestion, entering the saloon and shouldering their way to the bar. “Aguardiente,” Swede shouted in a loud voice. Two glasses and a bottle were set before them.

Watching his slovenly crewmen cross the street, the captain thought with regret of his life. Charles II had knighted him for sacking Spanish cities in Central America and for the capture of many Spanish ships. He was from a wealthy Newport family, but life there had been dull. He had gone from privateer to pirate, later trying to salvage sunken treasures. He’d been on hand to see the gold and silver saved from the storm-wrecked ship of a Spanish vice admiral, but he’d had no part in the reward from the King. There was a price on his head in some nations. But with forged papers and a good ship, he had avoided trouble. The colonial ports were rich, they snapped up stolen goods at bargain prices. But the big profits were finished. Sentiment against slavery was very strong now in England and the British were trying to clean the pirates out of the Atlantic. Times looked bad.

He was jolted out of his reverie when he saw Dom come out of the building with his chest, call a driver, and speed down the road in a carriage. The captain glared across the street at his crewmen and finally had a driver circle the front of the saloon. He dashed to the door, calling out to his men. He should have expected it! The Swede was standing defiantly over a dead man! Blood running from the man’s cheeks was proof enough. The pirate grinned challengingly around the circle of men.

“Swede,” pleaded the captain. “Lad, the carriage is waiting

and our friend with the money has left." The word "money" worked. With long razor-sharp knives in their hands, Gann's seamen backed outside and hurriedly entered the carriage.

"I'd like to have taken on a couple more of those fancy boys," said Swede. He polished his knife on the side of his boots as they followed the road out of town.

"Do you know where Plehve was going?" asked Blue, the other crewman.

"His coach was heading to the country. It shouldn't be hard to find. Hold!" he cried to the driver. "There's his vehicle!"

It took a few minutes to catch up, then the captain leaped out and questioned the other driver. "What happened to your passenger?" he asked. The driver looked into his ferocious countenance and visibly shuddered.

From the corner of his eye, he could see another man holding a long polished knife in his hand. He gulped. "Down the road toward the stable. It's a big barn. You can't miss it.

The captain jumped to the ground and they set off in pursuit. They passed a military patrol with a civilian in their ranks. The sergeant stopped and gave them a hard look, for only soldiers were entitled to gallop horses on roads near the city. However, he had more important things to do than issue a traffic summons and they went on their way. As the carriage came to a stop, the three men piled out and Captain Gann walked into the cool passageway between the box-stalls.

"Hello," he shouted.

"No one here, captain," called the Swede, who had stuck his head up into the loft. He came back down the ladder. "What do we do now?" he growled. "More waiting around? We don't want to waste time here."

Blue grinned. "The military might come back and question us about Swede's victim back at the bar."

"Let 'em come," the sailor said and his knife flashed from his belt. "I'm ready for them."

"Come, come now, Swede, we've more important things to do. I think there's a treasure chest here just waiting for us."

He walked into Berko's small office. "Dominick had a chest when he left his office. He couldn't carry it with him on horseback. So, my boys, let's start looking. Blue, you go down

this row of stalls, and Swede, you take the other side. And hurry."

The captain had tipped over Berko's cot and was rummaging through a closet when Swede called out, "Hey, come see what I found." They heard him laughing as he dragged the crippled Feijao toward them. The boy was whimpering and, as Swede pulled him up to the captain's feet, he hid his head under his own crossed arms.

"Boy," said the captain. "How long have you been here?" When there was no response, Swede raised his foot to kick him.

"Hold it, lad. One kick from your boot will kill him." The Swede grinned and nodded his head. His knife was in his hand and his eyes pleaded with the captain.

"If he doesn't talk, what have we got to lose?"

"First let me have a try." The captain pulled the boy up into a sitting position and then raised him to his feet. It was then they noticed his crippled legs.

"Why, he's not worth saving," said Swede. "Let me straighten him out." The child could only stare in terror, for he knew that the big giant with a knife wanted to kill him. The captain's grip was like a hot vise and pain coursed all through his wretched body. He held his hand out feebly, pleading for mercy.

"Where's the chest?" asked the captain in English. The boy could not understand. Gann then threw him to the ground, took a leather whip from a peg, and handed it to the Swede.

"Don't kill him, lad. Just loosen his tongue a little. Blue, you keep a lookout. The military might return." The loud crack of leather on Feijao's back echoed in the barn.

"Hold it! I'm afraid you've killed him." The boy's body was sprawled out lifelessly on the soft dirt. The captain rolled the child over. "He's either unconscious or dead, Swede. We'll get no word from him now. Let's draw his blood and then we can be sure."

Blue spoke hurriedly. "Here come the soldiers." The pirates ran to their coach, the Swede pausing for a second, his eyes fastened on the boy. He shrugged his big shoulders, then ran to the vehicle as it started to move.

Dominick had just pulled his sweating horse into a gallop,

but a mole had been at work and the mare stepped into the hole, falling to her knees. If Dom had not been looking over his shoulder to see if he were pursued, he would have managed to stay on. But he went over the horse's head, hitting the ground hard. The mare got to her feet and stood trembling and frightened. Dom grabbed the trailing reins with his right hand and jerked back cruelly. The mare threw up her head in pain and the reins pulled from his grasp. Pain flushed through his left shoulder and brought a wave of nausea that made him drop to his knees. The horse, finding herself free, raced back the way she had come and shied over to the side of the road as a coach with three men inside went galloping by.

"Somebody's afoot, captain," said Swede as he pointed out the running mare.

"Hold up," ordered Captain Gann. As the coach pulled to a stop, the men got out and the captain climbed up on the driver's step. "Hand me the reins. You get off here. We'll send your outfit back when we've done with it."

The driver scrambled down. He'd been hoping to leave this group—the men were evil. He'd seen them whip the boy and wondered if he himself would be left alive. He turned to hurry when an arm grabbed his neck. Then a sharp pain in his back drove all thought from his mind and engulfed him in darkness.

Swede dragged the body into the brush, fighting off insects. There were praying mantises, tsetse flies and bulldog ants. He was in near panic as he rushed out of the thick foliage into the road. The captain and Blue were amused but held their silence. There was no sign of the soldiers now, but they made haste, giving no concern to the laboring horses as they drew in great drafts of air with sides heaving.

Dominick Plehve saw them first and even from a distance, recognized the ugly face of Captain Gann. He stepped out into the road and held up his hand. The captain jerked back on the reins and the exhausted horses willingly stopped:

Dom watched with a slight feeling of nervousness as the Swede reached down, pulled loose some grass, and used it to clean his knife. The fellow squatted on the ground and honed the polished knife on the side of his boot. Dom pulled his eyes away and looked into the grinning face of the captain. "I'm

glad you've found me. How did we make out on our last slave venture?"

"Well, it cost me three crewmen, loss of time, and five hundred pounds of money!" There was a moment of silence before the captain reached into his jacket and brought out the report. "It's all here," he added. He handed it to Dom who, reaching for it, winced with pain. That drew the attention of the other men.

"You hurt?" Gann asked.

"I can do what needs to be done." Dom realized a sword was his only means of holding these men in check. Fortunately that arm was not injured. He drew his weapon half out of its sheath and then slammed it back into place. He didn't want to push too far for his only real hold on them was profit from their joint ventures.

"I'll read your report later," he said. He was seething with anger. The pirate run had always been profitable and having a few Indian slaves was insurance against loss. It was very simple, the rum and rice with bartering on the side. Dom was sure that Captain Gann was cheating, but now he planned to be aboard himself and would soon have several ships under his command.

The judge removed a bag of gold coins from his belt, tossing it to the captain. Swede stopped working on his knife and rose quickly to his feet. He and Blue watched with curious eyes as the captain weighed it in his hand.

"I am drawing all my funds from the bank," Plehve continued, "and I will need one of your crewmen, captain, to take a message to my banker. Also, I have people gathering a load of Indians and blacks for the slave market. We can plan on being ready to sail in just a few days."

With gold in their hands, a promise of more, and a load of slaves, Dom knew the men should have shown excitement. But they were silent.

"Blue," said the captain finally, "drive that team off the road. I can see a break in the trees. We'll walk and follow you." He turned to Dom. "We may have some soldiers after us. Swede bloodied his knife back in the city. Could be they're looking for you, too. What did you do with the captain-general?"

Dom couldn't hide his surprise at the captain's knowledge. "You saw me?" he smiled. "Oh, he had business to attend to in the city and we shared a ride from the ships."

"What was in that chest you hauled out of there? Gold?" Dom felt a rising resentment. It was *his* brain that was making plans and giving direction. It always had been. But he needed the captain, his crew, and the boat. This wasn't the time to make trouble.

By now they were off the main road and well out of sight. "The chest contained only personal items and records. I don't plan on going back to the city. Now, listen carefully. The stableman's name is Berko. He is entrusted with the chest and won't give it to anyone unless they are wearing my ring. Here it is." Dom slid it from his long finger and handed it to Captain Gann. Swede's greedy eyes sparkled at the sight. "You are to take my chest aboard the ship."

"We stopped by the stable, looking for you. Berko has been taken by the soliders and we found a crippled black boy there who refused to answer questions."

Dom could not hide his startled concern. "But the black boy is dumb. He could not talk even if he understood you! He couldn't have seen me with the chest."

"Don't concern yourself with him," replied Gann.

Plehve paused, then shrugged and continued. "I'm on my way to the Widow di Almagro's home. Afterwards, I will meet my men and join you with the slaves. I'm going on the ship with you."

The captain showed surprise. But you're our contact for gold and slaves. We don't need you aboard!"

"I can't stay here. We can continue to use my contacts. I have bigger plans that will give us far greater profits." He reached out his hand and placed it on the captain's arm. "Trust me, I will give you all the details after I come aboard."

He's full of lies, thought the captain. But I need gold and a load of slaves. After that, if he becomes a burden, the Swede can take care of him. "Let's have the note, then. Your lady friend is only a few miles away. We'll leave the coach in a back alley of the city and return to our ship after dark."

Dom didn't like the idea of walking, but it would back up his story of a fall and he could gain entrance to Tibela when

otherwise he might be turned away. Removing a paper from his pocket, he addressed a letter to his banker, Tomas Rodrico Gomez, and gave it to the captain.

"I'll look for word from you, Plehve. Make it soon, for my men are restless," the captain said. Then, without another word, the pirates went on their way.

Dom, his arm and shoulder burning with fiery pain, started on his walk to the home of Tibela di Almagro.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"I am Dominick Plehve. I have come to see your mistress."

A guard led the way up the veranda steps and called out for his mistress.

As he waited, Dom felt a sudden dizziness. Pain must be the cause. He glanced up to see that Tibela had come outside. Seeing Dom so pale and seemingly in discomfort, she came quickly to his side.

"What has happened to you, Señor Plehve?" Her voice was concerned.

"I had an accident on the road. My collarbone must be broken."

Tibela called for help. Several Indians assisted the injured man into the house to a guest room. He insisted on sitting in a chair rather than stretching out on the bed.

"I'm sorry to bother you in this way, Tibela," he said.

"It is not disturbing our household, señor. We just regret that you have been hurt."

"I do not see your little son. Has he gone to his bed? He must be a sound sleeper if this has not awakened him."

"Si, he sleeps well, my little one, for his room is just across

the hall. But do not concern yourself on his account. We will not awaken him." She turned back to Dom. "What can we do to assist you, senor? Should I send for the surgeon?"

"No, but if you will bind my arm across my body so that it cannot move, I will be grateful. Then I will leave. I don't want to impose upon your hospitality any more than necessary."

"You must stay for the night. It is dark now and too far to the city." Tibela then gave orders for strips of cloth to be prepared. Servants helped Dom Plehve to remove his coat and shirt. His face was contorted from the pain of the effort. His muscles quivered as the Indians followed his instructions regarding his arm.

"I am glad it is not my right arm that is injured, or you would have to feed me," he said through tight lips. He tried to smile, but it was a feeble effort.

Tibela had disliked and feared this man, but now her sympathy went out to him. She admired his courage. Once she had thought him handsome and glamorous and had briefly considered how lucky the girl would be who won his affections, but since her husband had disappeared, she had realized that he was shallow, selfish, and even cheap. Now his presence here was unsettling, like an unpleasant shadow.

With a cool damp cloth, she patted the sweat from his brow and face. He expressed his gratitude warmly. She did not want to open an avenue of conversation that would include another discussion of marriage, and drew back involuntarily. His eyes grew cold and sinister and she swallowed, seeking desperately for another topic of discussion.

"Can I get you something to eat or to drink, senor?" she asked hurriedly.

"I dislike troubling you, but perhaps some food and some coffee would help."

Tibela was glad for the excuse to leave him. "It will take but a few minutes," she said briskly and went down the hall.

When she returned with a tray of food and hot coffee, she stopped short—Plehve was not in the room. Then she saw that the door to little Roberto's chamber was ajar. With thundering heart and anguished premonition, she entered. It took a moment for her eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness. Then

she noticed the white cloth binding and gasped when she saw him sitting in a chair close to her child.

"Hand me the coffee, my dear. As you can see, I have decided to keep your little son company. If you will come in, I will explain my actions." Dom then told his experiences of the afternoon, adding, "And now your son will be my hostage to freedom."

"But what good will that do? How can I help you?" Her eyes pleaded and her face turned dead white as he lifted a small hand-pistol and aimed it close to the sleeping child's head.

"You will do exactly as I order or your child will die right now, in his bed." He smiled as he saw her hands gripped in her lap and the intense nod of her head." First, you will tell no one that I am here. Soldiers will come. If they find me, your son will die, and so will others—even you. Now, here is my plan, so you had best listen carefully."

As a girl, Tibela had shown her emotions freely, but now as a woman, she had learned to control them. She sank down on a chair and leaned forward. With a white face, she listened carefully to Dom. In an agony of uncertainty and panic, she knew that accommodating him in every way might save her little son—the very essence of her life and happiness.

Dominick Plehve watched her hands clasped at her unconsciously heaving breasts, her hand at her throat, the pleading of her large brown eyes, the trembling of her full red lips. He enjoyed the feelings of lust that coursed through his body and regretted that the soldiers would be here soon. He savored the sense of power over this reluctant woman who had repulsed him so consistently. He must, however, remember his danger, for it would be fatal to be trapped here. Captain Manuel de Souza would be merciless, and there was no doubt that he would have been released from the closet by now. I should have killed him, Dom sighed with regret.

He stood up, as he heard a slight noise at the door. Swinging the pistol close to the boy's head, Dom quietly nodded his head for her to answer.

Tibela understood. Carefully she rose and walked like a wooden doll in her long full skirts. She opened the door a crack. "Yes?"

"There are soldiers here, mistress," said an Indian maid. "They wish to speak with you."

"One moment, please." She closed the door and turned to Dom with a question in her eyes.

"You must meet them, of course. Have your maid stay here with me. She can care for the boy if he awakens." Dom motioned Tibela to go. "You know well what you must do, senora."

She nodded palely and called the maid inside. Her hand went across the servant's mouth as she opened it to scream when she saw the pistol. Tibela's hand moved down to the Indian's arm as she explained how the girl must help. Then she went through the door, closing it firmly behind her.

She paused briefly, then walked firmly down the long steps to the floor below, Tibela's mind was in turmoil. She tried to sort her thoughts and remember what she must do.

"Senora di Almagro, it is with deep regret that I trouble you so late in the day." Sergeant Becker stepped forward to kiss her hand as she reached the bottom step. Tibela allowed her hand to respond with slight pressure on his as she smiled and motioned him to follow. They walked wordlessly down the hall into a little sitting room. She did not stop there but went to the far side of the room. Unlocking a heavy oaken door, she opened it, stood aside for him to follow, then turned and, with brimming eyes, placed both of her hands in his.

"Oh, Moses, my dear friend, Dominick Plehve is here and he holds my little Roberto hostage. He will kill him if you make a move against him. I am glad that you are here, but you must do nothing to endanger Roberto's life. We are helpless."

There was a light knock on the door and Tibela stared wide-eyed at Moses. Only in severe emergencies were her servants permitted to disturb her in this room—the room of the holy ark. Here, in beautiful rich cabinets that covered the whole end of the room, was kept the Sepher Torah. At the top of mahogany cabinets were two tablets bearing the solid silver letters of the Ten Commandments. Sand on the floor in front of the cabinets was a reminder of the Israelites' wanderings in the desert. She turned with fear in her eyes, for to be caught here with these treasures—especially by foreign eyes, would spell death for her—and then who would save young Roberto?

She opened the door a crack and saw Chief Lamoni. He put two fingers to his lips and motioned to her.

"I know of your troubles, little daughter. I have brought the red-haired giant to you. He waits in the hall below. You must confide in him. Put your trust in him, my princess. He, only, can help." The old chief saw the signs of tears on her cheeks. "I will bring him here. It will be better."

During the brief wait, Tibela composed herself and wiped the tears from her cheeks with a fine cambric handkerchief. She looked up as a very tall man walked toward her and then saw that it was Scott Bolinski. The wooden peg leg was covered by his trouser and he walked as firmly as any man. She glanced down quickly to assure herself that the leg was indeed wood and then her eyes lifted to his amused glance. Color flamed across her face at the apparent discourtesy of staring at his affliction. She hadn't realized that he was so tall, she thought, placing both hands into his.

"You look wonderful, my friend. Not as though—as—as though—" Tibela's voice stopped. She was embarrassed.

"I know," he laughed gently at her confusion. "I don't look as though I had lost a leg. Well, I learned to walk all over again, but I had excellent care and fine teachers." He turned to Chief Lamoni, but the old man had gone.

"He has left." She looked down at his hands still holding both of hers.

Color rose up his neck to his face as he released her hands. Then he spoke softly. "The chief told me that I can be of service to you, senora. In what way do you need me?"

"Not here," she said, thinking that there was nothing this handsome young man could do. But still, Chief Lamoni had been explicit that she should depend on him. She took his hand and introduced him to Sergeant Becker. "Moses, you are aware now of my problems here. I must hurry back before Senor Plehve gets suspicious. Explain to Senor Bolinski what has happened. But please, don't do anything until I have talked with him again. I will return as soon as possible." She put a hand on an arm of each man. "Thank you both for being here when I need you so desperately." She hurried from the room.

They watched her depart. Then Moses gripped Scott's

shoulder. "We have much to talk of, lad, and one day soon, we must find the time."

Scott's eyebrows rose and he peered at the older man. Moses chuckled and added, "Yes, one day soon; but for now, I am Sergeant Becker, with a job to do."

Then suddenly, a scream of terror came from the top of the stairs. Both men ran, to find an Indian servant girl, her eyes wide with fright, staring through the doorway into little Roberto's room. Scott and Sergeant Becker rushed past her. Tibela lay unconscious on the floor. The servant who had been left to look after the boy was dead, her glazed eyes staring toward the ceiling.

Scott lifted Tibela into his arms and her eyes opened. She looked up dazedly. "Roberto—" she murmured. "My son." Her voice strengthened with rising hysteria. "Dominick Plehve has taken my child!"

The room now filled with others who had come at the sound of the scream. The sergeant swiftly covered the dead girl with a sheet. "He hit her too hard with his pistol. She is dead," he said quietly.

Tibela moaned in Scott's arms and, as he carried her from the room, he saw Chief Lamoni coming up the stairs. His look of age and frailty was deceiving, for he came quickly and without effort. Tibela saw him and reached out toward him.

He took her hand. "Senora," he said, "my warriors are yours."

Scott settled Tibela on a chair in the parlor and brought her a glass of sherry. "Drink it," he ordered. "We need answers."

Tibela obeyed and then, through her tears, told what had happened. Scott rose to his feet as the sergeant joined them. "The Indians can guide us," Moses said firmly, "and I am sure we can overtake Plehve. Never fear, senora. We will have them back before morning."

He raised his hand to Tibela and Scott as he followed his soldiers. The Indian guide ran ahead.

Soon the soldiers would have to abandon their horses for they had reached a trail that led up the green waters of the Amazon. The little group quickly disappeared from sight, deep into the mangrove forest, in a strange, deserted area. It was

said that a man could cease to be in these swamps, never to be seen again.

Scott took Tibela's arm and led her back into the house. "If you will help me get some supplies together, I will follow them, Tibela. Jens will be here shortly and I will ask the chief for another guide."

"Yes, oh yes," said Tibela, "and I will go with you." Scott raised his hand to protest, but already she was calling out orders. He smiled, for she was no longer weak and hysterical.

Scott knew little of Tibela di Almagro, but he was certain that she was capable and courageous enough to face the terrors of the jungle.

A party of Tibela's workers and Chief Lamoni's warriors, with Scott as leader, were on the point of departure when Tibela came running from the house wearing a light shirt tucked into baggy trousers, high knee-boots, a straw hat, and a light pack on her back. A maid followed her taking last-minute instructions.

The princess moved up beside Scott. "Let us go, for we have few enough hours of daylight left." The men, arranging small packs and supplies on their backs, all stopped and turned toward her.

Chief Lamoni, who had been quietly advising the group, came quickly to her side. "Now little Tibela, it is not wise for you to venture into the jungle." He pointed up to the sky. "Storm clouds are buildings."

Scott urged, "The chief is right. We will travel as fast as we can and meet with the soldiers. We will bring your son back to you, Tibela."

"I know what you are saying may be true," she answered with tear-wet eyes. "It would not be wise for me to travel in the jungle and slow your progress. Even now the soldiers might be returning my son to me. I will go with you only a short way, for I must be there to meet him. He is so small and he will be terrified."

Scott nodded to the workers to proceed and then followed the two copper-colored mulatto guides as they moved lightly onto the trail that led toward the looming jungle. The four

Indian warriors kept to the rear. The trail sloped downhill as it entered the thick green foliage.

Tibela walked beside Scott and Jens, hoping that the giant's leg would not be overtaxed. She considered his offer to help her. He was a virtual stranger, and yet not a stranger to her at all. She glanced up at his profile: the broad full forehead, the straight nose—narrow, curved, and full at the nostrils, the sensitive mouth and strong jaw. His body was like a Greek god and his flaming red hair was like a banner in the strong sunlight. With pity, she thought how dreadful for him to have lost his leg so young in his life. During his ravings, she had come to realize how important his virility, his manhood, was to him. She gazed tenderly at him as he moved beside her. She was inordinately glad his injury had not diminished him at all.

After an hour of travel, Scott knew that he would have to tighten the straps that held his wooden leg in place. The ground was spongy and the peg sank too deeply, making walking very awkward. He wondered if the beautiful woman walking so freely beside him was sensitive to his inability to keep up with the others. Had she perhaps come along to slow the pace, as though he needed more time? He felt the blood rise slowly up his neck and into his face. Never in all of his life had anyone, especially a woman, been given reason to think him incapable of doing whatever anyone else could do. He felt shame. He tried to drive the thought from his mind.

Then Julio, a guide, ran back. He spoke with Tibela. "The soldados return, senora!" Scott saw the joy leap into her eyes. He reached out to caution against high hopes until they knew something, but Tibela broke into a run.

Scott watched helplessly for he could not follow. Jens walked by his side. "Do you think they have the boy?" the gunner asked.

Scott pointed ahead. Two soldiers led four horses toward Tibela and Julio. The princess felt her strength drain and she started to shiver as she saw that her child was not with them. As they drew closer, she stepped forward and spoke through trembling white lips. "Where is my son—and the sergeant?"

A soldier touched his hand to his hat. "We have not found him, but we have talked to a woman who saw the child so we

know we are on the right trail. The sergeant and the rest of our troops are moving on. We cannot use the horses any longer in the jungle. I am to take them back and guide the captain-general and his men to the sergeant. Corporal Delgado will take you to the sergeant's camp," he said, pointing to his companion.

It was a full report. But then he hesitated. Scott asked, "Is there something more, soldier?"

"Begging your pardon, senor, senora, but I think it is unwise for you to go on the trail. It is no place for a lady or a—" The man glanced at the wooden peg exposed beneath Scott's trouser leg. He reddened and backed away, giving a slight bow and a salute.

Scott motioned Julio to move onward. So now the men looked at him in the same class as a woman, he thought bitterly as he plodded along. It's no place for a woman and a cripple, the man had meant. He squeezed his big fists together until his knuckles whitened and the muscles of his arms bulged against the sleeves of his shirt. He felt his blood respond and course wildly through his veins.

Suddenly lightning, as though triggered by his rage, crackled through the sky and wind whipped against the high canopy of treetops. The last sunlight penetrated the forest floor in flickering patterns and the wall of green vegetation through which the narrow trail twisted, grew somber and forbidding.

Everywhere, the jungle creepers stuck their tentacles on tree trunks, twisting and strangling them. Ants had mowed down the green of the jungle over a wide swath, carrying leaves aloft like small banners. Blooms with sticky smells, intoxicating as a drug, clung to the party's nostrils. Under the influence of the tropics, their nerves became taut and ready for treachery and ambush.

They had been on the trail for some time when the distant sound of thunder warned of an approaching storm. The jungle whitened as the sky split again with lightning and Scott saw Tibela's wide eyes glance back as though not wanting to lose contact with home. Great gray-black clouds crashed against one another and the very earth shifted beneath their feet. Senses reeled, instincts crying out to flee.

Suddenly Tibela turned and threw herself against Scott. He held her trembling body close and spoke comfort he did not feel.

"A soldado, he is there," Julio yelled, pointing.

Scott looked over Tibela's head down the dimly lit trail. Something was suspended over the path, swaying with the movement of the winds. A cold hand seemed to clutch at his heart.

"Jens," he called, releasing himself from the girl's embrace. "Guard Tibela." Four Indian warriors also surrounded the princess, following Chief Lamoni's orders that they should never leave her side.

Scott stood with legs apart, staring at what was left of the hanging soldier. He glanced swiftly around. "Where is Sergeant Becker?" The workers shrugged their shoulders, their eyes wide with terror.

They all looked at the headless body hanging by the armpits, with hands tied behind. He hung between the trees on each side of the trail. A fire had been built under the man's feet and his trousers had caught fire and burned up the sides of his legs. Large blisters covered his ankles and his calves and feet were black.

Another bolt of lightning came straight down from the darkening sky and Scott glanced back toward Tibela. He ordered the guides to clear the trail and then return. They would make camp. As he started back, the first raindrops came down like shots of silver and exploded against the jutting rocks. Tarps were spread out for shelter. The wind pulled at them and rolls of thunder shook leaves and twigs down. As the storm broke, sheets of water fell. They were barely able to get up a tent because of the furious wind gusts against the canvas. The sides billowed and threatened to burst loose.

Jens' voice was heard above the wind as he shouted orders to secure the ropes. He came in soaked, cursing, and angry. "God Almighty," he said, "look at my hands." His palms looked like pincushions covered with sharp spines.

"Palm trees," said Julio. "Very bad. Make poison." He searched his pack and drew forth a small pair of seashells. By the light of a small fire, he pulled the spines out while Tibela held Jens' hand.

The stench of sodden leaves, logs, and rotting vegetation smothered them, as they waited out the storm, under their hot and humid tent. At about midnight, the rain ceased. Then the unknown voices and phantom lights began. The sound of crunching jaws, warning whistles, snarling, yelping, and belching of beasts penetrated the night. The Indians started several fires to keep away prowling animals and the flames sputtered as water dripped from the trees.

At daylight the warriors and the native workers crouched in the thickets, hands on their guns, peering into the jungle as the mid-morning light began to feebly penetrate the earth. The coarse and tangled roots of the mangroves looked like huge boa constrictors.

In a few minutes Julio came into the camp carrying several large piranha fish. He had made a spear of reed and attached a metal-barbed hook. "It is the delicacy of the waters," he announced proudly.

The fish was filleted and spread over green branches. There was enough for all, with extra remaining, which Julio rolled in large tree leaves and placed in his pack.

Scott looked into Tibela's eyes and understood her need to continue their search. The trail became more dense and difficult and the guides used their long, razor-sharp machetes as expertly in the jungle as in the sugar fields. They stopped frequently to study the trail, to cut vines, and to look for snakes. Scott knew the men could have traveled much faster alone. They gazed back at him occasionally and whispered and he himself was terribly resentful at his own enforced slowness. He had to admit that it took all his strength to keep from falling to the ground. He felt irritable and testy, knowing that the jungle was his throbbing enemy. He would not let it defeat him.

Scott noticed that water had risen on the river and the whole country pulsed like a giant heart. Jens stood beside him, his swollen hands covered with salve. Scott waited for Tibela to catch up while Jens moved on ahead with a sailor's typical swagger—eager to conceal his nervousness. Hanging vines crawled with insects, jaguars growled and the screeching of green flocks of parrots made everyone jittery. Something had happened ahead. He could feel it.

Guides Julio and Silva ran back to exhibit a piece of fabric. They were on the right trail.

Scott felt some of his tension leave as Tibela put her hand in his and walked beside him. He looked down at her and a fierce feeling of protectiveness welled through him. She is mine, he thought, then subdued his emotions as they caught up with Jens who was looking out over the water. "Sea turtles!" Jens exclaimed happily. "The water is boiling with them."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Puka, chief of the Xingo, cannibals, ground his black, pointed teeth in angry pain. He was furious that he had not been able to lead the raid on the red people by the sea. He missed hearing the cheers of his people when the captives were brought in. He was in pain because he had slept with a slave girl who had given him the fire mountain disease. He had not known that this coppery-skinned girl had been repeatedly raped by men from the pirate ship and had contracted this painful and sometimes deadly disease.

Now he was stretched out on a boarhide hammock and a jaguar skin was bunched under his head like a pillow. He shifted two necklaces hanging about his neck. They were made from teeth removed from the head of an enemy. Puka watched his people shuffle about in filth, manure and the dampness of their straw huts. Swarms of mosquitos, wide columns of ants, and the shrill cries of children, as well as their scolding mothers, were all a great irritation to Puka.

He was glad of his captive, Paji, who was a good companion. He had captured Paji over a year ago and they had become

friends. They had shared food, the hunt, and women. Several babies in the camp were obviously fathered by Paji and would, of course, be eaten once they were weaned. Puka was sorry that the council had set a date for the execution. Invitations had been given and everything was being made ready, for tomorrow was the date.

Puka glanced at Paji. Though they had shared the copper-skinned girl, Paji had not contracted this burning disease. He, Puka, did not understand it. Tenderly he touched his sore vitals. The rituals of his medicine men had been ineffective in their healing and their herbs and salves had given him no relief from the burning. Of course, the girl had been thrown into the firepit, for the priest had said that the fire that consumed her body would draw the pain from his loins. He had lied, so he too had died.

A cooking fire smoldered nearby and it mingled with the smell of the stinking camp, blending with the rotting jungle aroma. The hum and buzz of flies and insects filled the air with an unceasing cacophony.

A captive boy screamed, drawing Puka's attention to the carving table where he had just been castrated. There were seven youngsters lined up and some camp members stood idly about, watching the familiar procedure. Puka noticed that the boys were all in good flesh and young, so they would be tender. A second boy was taken by two men, one on each side of him. As they raised him up onto the table they pressed his arms and shoulders down and raised his legs to give the medicine man easy access with his razor sharp knife.

The raw testicles were highly prized as a succulent morsel and now they were brought to Puka to share with his family. If there were a large number of captive boys, he would share them with his favorite warriors, for a man's fertility would be strengthened by eating this source of life.

Several captive girls huddled dazedly on the sidelines. Size was important and girls capable of bearing children were parceled out to the gleeful warriors. A girl, if fruitful, would have camp chores only and would be honored and protected when her child was born. Her baby would then be eaten when it was weaned. As long as they could produce children, the girls remained alive.

Puka looked longingly upon these fresh young girls, but his flesh was raw and swollen and he could not now satisfy his lust. He picked out the most attractive girl and had her taken to his shanty. Perhaps later he could satisfy himself with her. Sly amused looks from his warriors made him furious. He must find a way to gain back his standing with the men. He ruled by his might and he knew that a show of weakness was an invitation for a challenge by an aspiring warrior. If he were beaten in combat, he would be killed and his family driven into the waters of the voracious piranha.

He had to somehow rid himself of this fire in his loins, for the flowing pain raced through his swollen veins and cramps ripped his belly and leg muscles. He must be able to lead his men against their enemies and bring home many captives in triumph. Perhaps he could even capture the princess. He would keep her for himself.

His attention was caught when one of the older boys struggled with the butcher. He was strong for his age and it was bad for the other boys to see his resistance. Castrated boys usually became docile and were kept for some time before being eaten. But why wait with this one, Puka thought. His people needed a celebration and this would take their minds from his own affliction and weakness. It would show them that he was still their chief.

He called out commands and the lad was wrestled onto the table on his stomach. His hands were crossed behind his back and he was pushed forward until his head hung over the edge of the table. Camp women ran forward with their earthen bowls to stand eagerly by. Grasping a handful of hair, the head was pulled back and up, exposing the straining muscles of the throat. With a deft slice of a knife, red blood gushed into the waiting vessels. Children danced eagerly around dipping greedy fingers into the bowls and then into their mouths.

The women and children were now shoved out of the way with curses from the butcher and his helpers. It took but a few moments to prepare the carcass for roasting fires and stew pots. Nothing was thrown away. Puka noticed that the sounds of buzzing insects increased. The rest of the boys were submissive and they went to the bloody table with no further resistance.

Puka returned the smiles of his grateful people. Though the

pain inside him boiled like a kettle, he silently prayed for coolness in his blood that he might continue to smile and not show the weakness he felt. He must soon join the fierce-looking warriors who stood near the roasting pit with their war clubs, bows and arrows, and blow pipes.

After the stories of their feats, the men talked of their next raid against the whites and the redskins. A spirit of gaiety prevailed in the camp and Puka looked benevolently upon his people. They gave him admiring looks as he rose to his feet. A great yellow-headed Amazon parrot came gliding in from the mangrove swamp and landed on a tree limb over his head. It was a good sign. He turned and went back to his shanty for the night. He must rest. Tomorrow would be the celebration and execution of his friend Paji.

When morning came, the camp stirred with great excitement. Friends gathered from neighboring villages to join in the festive execution. The ritual slaughter was performed with a carefully painted club and cord, both decorated according to tradition. For the past few days, Paji had been tormented by the women with descriptions of his impending fate. He spent his last night dancing and taunting his tormentors; singing songs which foretold their ruin, and proclaiming his pride at dying as a strong warrior. All was now ready. The men dragged the captive to the center of the camp, removing the ceremonial rope and tying it around his waist. It was held at both ends by two men. Paji was then permitted to retaliate by throwing fruit at his enemies.

The executioner was painted and dressed in a long feathered cloak. He hissed at Paji, "You are going to die, son of a pig."

"I have killed many of your people," shouted the slave, "and my relatives will avenge my death." He was then given a small club and tied with sufficient freedom to dodge and parry the blows aimed at him by the tribe.

The blow that felled Paji should have come from Puka, but the chief's pain had made him unable to stand. He sat and watched as his people shouted and whistled when Paji's skull was shattered. Old women rushed in to drink the warm blood, children were invited to dip their hands in it, and the mothers

smeared their nipples so that their infants could develop a proper taste for it.

The quartered body was roasted and the old women licked the grease running from the sticks. The liver was given to Puka, who relished it. Children ran about singing and beating drums made of stomach skins. Flutes made of arm and leg bones let out eerie sounds that could be heard above the noise of the camp.

A little girl came to Puka and offered him Paji's extracted teeth. Her hands were covered with blood and flies were crawling and buzzing about her face and hands. Some of the front teeth were black and they had all been sharpened. They would be cleaned, pierced and made into a necklace like the one Puka wore.

"You may have them, child," Puka said and smiled at her for the girl understood and was pleased. This meant she would share his bed. Then a shadow crossed her face. Word had gone around that the great warrior, Puka, was no longer a maker of babies. She would be an outcast if she had no children and then she would be sacrificed and eaten. Puka understood her fears and put out his hand and touched her arm. "Never fear, little one, you shall have your babies." The girl ran giggling to her friends.

A new wave of excitement came over the village as a runner arrived with good news. "A warrior returns, bringing with him a white priest and his woman."

The prisoners came into view. The woman had a rope around her neck and the priest still rode her back. They were led to Puka. The female's mouth was open as she gasped for breath while the priest held up his iron cross and shouted threats of hell fire. His eyes were glazed with wrath as he looked upon the bloody orgy around him.

Puka gave orders. A mat was brought and laid out, and the priest was told to sit. The woman knelt and laid down the shouting clergyman.

A piece of roasted flesh was offered. The priest brushed it away with his hand, yelling and calling down the punishments of God. The woman crawled away to block out the horrors she was witnessing. She recognized boys from the camp of Chief

Lamoni. They had bloodstains on their thighs where fresh wounds were draining. She saw the wide terrified eyes of young girls peering from the shanties where they were held to later satisfy their captors. She watched as Puka gave a signal and the priest was knocked unconscious to still his voice.

"Where are your brothers with more slaves?" Puka asked a lone cannibal.

"I alone escaped," he said, and his eyes were wide with fear. "A giant with flaming red hair and a leg of wood and steel carried a sword of fire. He brings arrows from the sky. My brothers are all dead but me."

There was silence in the camp except for the buzzing of mosquitos and flies. It was starting to rain and Puka saw snakes from the trees dropping into the patched roofs of the shanties as they searched for shelter inside the huts. There is evil all around, thought Puka; the burning of fire in my loins, my warriors killed by a giant, and now this mad priest with his curses.

Puka called a council meeting and the members discussed what must be done. Puka listened to each, then dismissed them with a wave of his hand. He took a long drink of the white man's water. It sent him to coughing and his eyes watered, but then his vision cleared and he spoke with decision. "We will smoke the flesh of the white priest. Then if he is God, we will find peace again." The priest was conscious and heard Puka. He yelled out once more.

"Your souls will rot and burn in hell if you touch me. Snakes will rain down from the skies and you will all perish."

"You eat your God, so we will eat you. You tell us you are a man of God," they answered as warriors dragged him across the filthy yard to a shanty where his shouts and curses were beyond the ears of Puka.

The natives smiled for they knew their chief had great wisdom. Then their eyes all turned as one upon the woman. Puka considered her. She was olive-skinned and shapely and should bear strong healthy babies. Perhaps she could cool the fire in his loins. He had her taken to his shanty, though she fought every step of the way.

Perhaps she could take away his fire mountain disease, but it was obvious she must be taught her place. He entered his

shanty and took hold of a whip. The warriors and their women smiled. The chief would have an understanding with this woman.

A shout went up from a young guard. He ran into the camp calling, "A white man and a boy are coming."

Puka came from his shanty, whip still in hand, and those eating wiped their mouths on their arms and stopped to stare. The priest mumbled, "That's impossible. No one in his right mind would come here."

A dozen warriors leaped to their feet, throwing their food to one side and racing after the young guard. It was only a few moments until they returned, dragging the man and a terrified small boy. Both were thrown upon the ground before Puka.

The chief looked at his excited people and beads of sweat rolled from his forehead, not from the oppressive heat, for he was used to that, but from the pain in his loins. He ground his teeth. White men had brought this disease to him. The whip was still in his hand and in a sudden rage he spent his fury on the white man lying before him.

As the stiff fibrous whip cut into Dom's back, it drove exhaustion from his mind and he recoiled like a smitten beast. Never before had anyone dared to strike him. He rose to his feet, throwing all caution aside. He threw his weight against Chief Puka and pushed him back into the wall of the shanty. There he pounded his fists into the face of the cannibal chief and beat him into the ground. Before the astonished warriors could pull him off, he had nearly taken the breath of life from their ruler.

The man's arms at last were pinned to his back and a great cry of pain escaped his lips. The broken bone in his shoulder separated and tore at his screaming nerves.

As the fight went on, the priest's woman crawled to the back of the shanty, parted the walls and escaped. She ran back down the trail and hid in the brush.

Puka rose slowly to his feet. Now all his warriors knew of his weakness. His face was bruised and he could feel the flies biting viciously at the wounds. He dared not show further weakness by letting his hand brush them away. He grasped for ways to win back respect from his people. Their eyes searched him, appraising their leader. Looking at the filth on his body from

being rolled on the earth by a mere white man, Puka knew he must think of some torture that would surpass anything they had witnessed before. The warriors held fast to the captive but stepped to one side as Puka came forth to stare into the man's eyes. Recognition came to his face and he broke into a smile, showing sharpened black teeth.

The man's eyes were almost swollen shut from the blows of the warrior's clubs. He expected further injuries and when they did not come, he ventured to look. Now he recognized the chief. Both men seized this opportunity for greeting, for Puka had learned a smattering of the white man's language as a boy. This man meant gold for the tribe. To Dom, Puka meant the capture of more slaves.

With a show of fury, Puka shoved aside those holding the man. He was their friend. He had paid Puka gold for taking a white captive to the Jivaro headshrinkers. The cannibals relaxed and laughed. It was a big joke when one white man paid gold to have another white man killed.

"We are sorry, senor," Puka spoke. "You were not recognized. What can we do to make amends?" They walked into the yard and Puka sat in his hammock. He offered the seat where only yesterday his friend Paji had rested.

Dominick Plehve regained his composure though his back still burned where the whip had cut. But an unhappy memory was etched in his brain. He hoped that someday he would kill Puka for this humiliation. "I am here for several reasons," he said. "First, I have a ship waiting to be loaded with slaves and I will pay gold upon delivery." He glanced up; the chief looked straight ahead and his face showed no interest. He wondered how the man could stand flies eating at his flesh. Suddenly he felt concern. Would the leader forgive his attack?

"I also have the son of Tibela di Almagro," he added. "We will get much gold as ransom from her."

The chief looked at him with a startled expression that changed to deep anxiety. He pointed to the boy now sitting and staring at them. "Is that the son of Senora di Almagro?" He rose painfully to his feet. "This means there will be a search party of soldiers. Indian warriors will also come. We have sold slaves illegally and taken many Indian children!" Puka had to sit down again. He pushed his fist into the pit of his stomach to

relieve the pain. Killing and eating Paji had been a good celebration, but his luck was still bad. Now it looked like they would have to leave camp and with heavy rains due, it was a bad time.

Dom saw these conflicting emotions flicker on the chief's face. "Puka, to capture slaves, we must go where they are. It would be well to move immediately, and have no contact with those that follow us. After we capture our slaves, we can force them to fight the Indians. Then there will be no risk for your people. There will be no survivors to bring more soldiers either."

Dom saw the chief relax in agreement. Puka stood and called out orders to his people. They immediately prepared to break camp. The older women looked about and muttered their disapproval although they carried supplies to canoes that lined the riverbank. Puka worried. With the captives, there might be too many for the number of boats. The captives were food and could not be left behind, so a few older men and women might have to remain. They could manage for awhile, he thought.

The chief called two of his warriors and pointed to his shanty. "Take the woman and young girl to my boat and tie them up." They would make a temporary camp at dark and then, around the fire, he would pick up where he had left off with the woman. The whip lay coiled at his side and he relished the thought of whipping her flesh before he stroked her white skin with his hands.

Suddenly the cringing warrior cried out, "Aii! The woman has escaped!" Dom's eyes flicked to the whip that Puka held. He saw the rage in his eyes and, knowing Puka had syphilis, felt pity. He recognized the signs, for it was the biggest killer of natives in recent years.

He spoke calmly. "Searching now for a worthless woman could cost us our lives." He saw the chief's indecision. Then a young Indian slave girl was brought from his shanty. As the eyes of the men feasted on her shapely body, Puka's mind was made up. He followed his warriors as they pulled the girl along toward the boat. The woman would die in the jungle. The beasts would tear her flesh. Yes, she would regret fleeing.

The priest, now conscious, dragged himself to the opening of the shanty. "God will rain down snakes upon your heathen

heads," he yelled. "You have sinned and your souls will be thrown into everlasting fire." He went into a fit of coughing, then raised his feverish eyes and saw Dom. His bony finger pointed. "You now have a devil among you who will lead to your quick death."

Puka stopped to ponder these words. *Would* this white man bring more bad luck? He was superstitious and, though he had planned on killing the priest, he decided it was not a good time to tempt the gods.

"Kill the old fool," shouted Dom. "He can testify against us."

"We will let the jungle kill him," Puka replied. "He is as good as dead now."

It angered Dom to have to take orders from a savage, but it would be brief. He nodded and followed the chief. The boats were quickly loaded and more than three hundred natives with their supplies moved out into the reddish muddy waters of the Rio del Sangre, the river of blood. A few gray-headed figures were left, lamenting, as they watched the boats leave. There had not been room for all.

Roseanna watched from her hiding place. She had seen Dominick Plehve and the boy come into the camp. When all was quiet again, she rose from her hiding place in the heavy foliage. She had laid in mud and slime but luckily her long dress had covered all but her hands and face. They, however, were swollen with mosquito bites. Only by burying her hands in the folds of her dress had she kept the insects from tearing the flesh from her bones.

She walked quietly to a small stream of cool, clear water that fed into the river. It was so clear that she could see red sand at the bottom. The filtered sunlight slanted against the bank and cast her reflection in the water. She stripped off her filthy clothes and stepped into the water, diving in and swimming luxuriously about.

Monkeys scolded in the treetops. A great cat with yellow green eyes watched her from his high perch. He had been looking at the woman since her escape from Puka's hut.

Sergeant Becker knew that he was nearing the village for he heard faint voices in the distance. He hid behind some brush at

the rustle of leaves near the lagoon and then watched, stunned, as he saw a beautiful white woman appear, stark naked, a few yards from him. He could see her long hair now, trailing behind her as she dove and swam. He wondered if his mind had snapped as his eyes filled with her lovely face and form.

He had been on the run most of his life and now, in his late thirties, he was single and suddenly lonely. He still had several more years of military service before he would be free. Free, he thought. For a Jew, that would never really happen. He had been molded by birth and circumstance to have control of his emotions and had become a rigidly self-disciplined man. But here in this humid, raw, insect-infested jungle, he watched the fluid grace of the girl and felt a longing he had never allowed himself to experience before. His self-denial was shattered. He relaxed, sank back in the shadows of a tree, and just watched. He wanted this woman. Her form and beauty were perfect. Then, as she waded into the shallow water and kneeled to scrub her clothes upon a rock, he saw also character, depth, and sadness in her face.

Suddenly she reached for her clothes and her eyes looked directly into his hiding place. He held his breath for fear she would hear him. Something had reached her, perhaps his thoughts or his staring. Now he felt a stirring of remorse for his invasion of her privacy. He turned his head and dropped his eyes with pounding heart. He glanced back again to see if she were indeed real or just a figment of his imagination. She was gone.

He moved cautiously from cover. It could have been a dream, an illusion of his need. He listened but heard no voices from the camp and ventured tentatively onto the sandy bank. She was real! There were her footprints and they pointed toward the camp. He had forgotten his desire for a bath and followed. He must find her. It was too dangerous for her out here alone.

The great jungle cat went softly down the slanted tree, following the man, stepping carefully over a great snake that lay coiled about the tangled roots. He paused as a great flock of parrots streamed by in a flash of green. His ears flickered, testing his environment. Then the beast came softly to where the man had lain. He picked up the trail and sniffed to find the

woman's scent. After storing in his mind what he had learned, he padded softly up the trail they had taken.

Roseanna came back into the camp of the cannibal Xingos. She had watched from the dense foliage and knew everyone but the old ones had gone. She would find her way back to the city for she had come with the padre over many jungle trails. She needed to do penance and must fulfill her obligations to the priest. Though he was impotent, she loathed him sleeping against her warm body. He was always cold. The need to rub his painful and deformed legs and to carry him had been a great trial, almost beyond her endurance. But she had sinned, he said. She had married a man without the blessing of the Church. Even though the man had been killed the first night of their marriage, the priest said she had sinned and that she must seek penance.

As the girl neared the camp, the old priest caught sight of her and raised his fists. "You witch, you left me. I shall never free you from your sins." She ran forward for she saw the bruised swelling on his head. He muttered curses on her as she knelt and dabbed at his wound with a damp strip torn from her skirt.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

A short time earlier, Tomas Rodrico Gomez, the banker, stepped out of his building and onto a walkway in the city of Belem. Coaches, chaises, and buggies jolted over the cobblestone street. A small herd of horses, mules, and cattle went by, driven by half-dressed boys. Wagons took cotton, tobacco, indigo, sugar cane, wheat, and rice to the docks to be placed onto ships. Loads of hides passed by, with noisy boys riding on top.

Tomas straightened his silk tie. He wore a waistcoat and breeches of embroidered dove-colored velvet, a silk-lined coat with velvet cuffs, pearl-colored silk stockings, a wig, and a hat. He carried an elegant cane with head and chain of gold. He sported a large gold watch and wore rings on most fingers. His dress marked his elevated status.

The banker stood alertly as was his long-standing habit and searched the street for foreign eyes. He was a Jew and no man in the city of Belem knew this—except for Dominick Plehve.

From his office window he had earlier observed a tradesman

walking down the street with a cloth tied around his ankle. This was the signal for a special Hebrew meeting. The meeting place was nearby in a secluded warehouse used occasionally for auctions when the English slave boats came into port.

Tomas put his hand to the brim of his gold-laced beaver hat as two of his business friends walked by. They both smiled politely and raised their hands in a gesture to etiquette.

For the past eight years, Tomas had lived here in Belem, where the sea tangled with the land, and had seen the city prosper with the heavy demand for Indian slaves. But now the good times were over. There were less demands and fewer Indians. It was hard to believe that hundreds of thousands of Indian slaves had been sold from this port. Planters had now found that African blacks made better field workers and were less prone to disease. Thus the slave business here had gradually diminished.

An attractive young mulatto woman walked by. He knew that she was Dominick Plehve's mistress. She looked modestly down at the cobblestones. Tomas recalled what Dom had recently said. "Portuguese use the white women for marriage, mulattos for sex, and negros for work." As he watched Yvonne, he reflected that life here was hell for blacks, purgatory for whites, and a paradise for the mulattos. Incredibly the woman had golden hair and blue eyes. He had seen her leave with Dominick in his carriage less than two hours ago, but now the judge was nowhere in sight. Tomas pondered whether to ask about Dom, but then thought better of it and let her pass. There was much foot traffic and it would do his image no good if he was seen with a mulatto woman.

He was about to cross the street when a patrol of soldiers came by. Riding with them was Berko, the stableman, looking very uneasy indeed. Tomas was curious. Could the fellow be under arrest?

Suddenly, a huge unshaven seaman rushed up to Tomas and shoved a note to him. "Are you the banker, Gomez?" he demanded in a rough voice. As his eyes rolled over the elegant man, a thin smile cracked his ugly face. He was obviously drunk. Tomas stepped backward before nodding his head in acknowledgment.

"Here, this is for you." The man left, crossing the street toward a saloon.

Tomas returned to his office immediately. The clerks busied themselves again, for they had thought their boss had left for the day. After shutting the door to his private office, he carefully put his hat upon a shelf and then sat down heavily.

He unfolded the note and saw the signature of Dominick Plehve. The name hit a sensitive nerve, bringing a wave of anxiety to his mind. "We are making our move now," the note read. "Draw all funds from the bank and meet me in two days at the place shown. Your full cooperation is necessary. You will say goodbye to Belem forever." The full implications of the note left Tomas bewildered and frightened and he had difficulty thinking clearly.

He was a fugitive from the torture chambers of Voronezh where he and his countrymen had been rescued by the red-haired giant, Kurtsev Bolinski. In Lisbon, their identities had been discovered and they had barely escaped again with their lives. Hidden among the wagons and carts of Menasseh ben Yakov, they had been taken to a Dutch ship which had brought them to Belem. It had been more than twenty-five years since that horrible massacre in Voronezh. Then he was discovered by Dominick Plehve, who verified that he and others were wanted back in Portugal. The officers of the Inquisition had long arms.

Tomas was no longer sweating. He was cold, icy cold. I am a Jew, he thought, and with this knowledge, Dominick Plehve has controlled me. He has borrowed from me and manipulated books to his advantage. The greatest of his swindles concern the accounts of the widow, Tibela di Almagro. Funds more than sufficient to meet all of her loans have been kept secret at Plehve's insistence. Payments have come due and foreclosure is imminent. Dom Plehve would pick up the notes, pay them with the girl's own money, and thus acquire her vast estates.

He wiped his face with his handkerchief. As for the girl's husband, Tomas suspected that Dom knew something of the man's disappearance. Now he, Tomas, was expected to rob the bank and put his life into the hands of this criminal. Suddenly he became alert. Why was Dominick Plehve running away—

and sending demanding notes. Was he fleeing for some reason? The banker arose and pushed the note deep into his pocket. He put on his peruke, fixed his collar, donned his hat and coat, and departed for his meeting.

He paused as a lady was carried by on a litter, her skin ashen with malaria. She was being taken into the church where she could die with a blessing from the priest. Perhaps a nun would close her eyes.

"Sir," he heard Sergeant Becker call out to him. "I apologize for inconveniencing you, but there is an emergency. We are unable to locate the captain-general. Have you seen him?"

Tomas wondered if there could be some tie between the note he had received and the disappearance of the captain-general. "Earlier I saw Judge Plehve and the captain-general arrive in a coach. They came into the building together. I have not seen either of them since," he replied.

Dom's mulatto mistress was nearby. "I saw Judge Plehve leave, sergeant, but the captain was not with him then."

"Perhaps you would kindly accompany me?" the banker suggested to Sergeant Becker and Yvonne. "We could look in the judge's office."

The three entered the building and went upstairs to the chambers. A clerk with a swollen lip met them in an outer office. He was positive there was no one inside and hoped they would not find it necessary to enter, but the sergeant insisted. Tomas could almost feel Dom's presence here, as he saw the ink spot on the floor and papers scattered on the desk. The sergeant went to the closet door and tried to open it, but it was locked. No one was there—certainly not the captain-general. They all turned to leave.

Tomas hesitated a moment. Something was not quite right. His eyes went around the room. Then he asked the frightened clerk, "Where is the chair that is usually by the desk?"

"It was here this morning, sir," the clerk answered fearfully.

"And the cord that holds back the drape? It seems to be hanging loose and the rope is gone. Perhaps we had better open the closet door. Do you have a key?"

"No sir," the clerk answered. "The judge has the only one."

"We will force the door open," the sergeant said. "We have

searched everywhere else for the captain-general. He may be dead."

The statement caused each person in the room to look at the others. Yvonne blanched, "You do not need me now. I must go." She hurried out.

The walls of Dom Plehve's office were covered with weapons of war, for this was his hobby. The sergeant chose a battle-axe from the wall and soon a hole appeared in the closet door and the sergeant peered inside. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he found himself staring into the captain-general's wide-open eyes. He put renewed vigor into his chopping and finally, throwing down the axe, called out, "The captain-general is here and alive."

The message was carried outside, where a crowd had now gathered. It took but a moment to free the captain and he stamped circulation back into his legs and rubbed his wrists.

"Sergeant," he said, "form a patrol and assemble in the street." He glared about the room and, noting all the curious eyes from those in the doorway, called after the officer, "Clear this building!" He turned back to Tomas and said sternly, "Dominick Plehve was under arrest by the king's orders; he must be returned to Portugal."

Tomas paled, for Dom might yet win his freedom, whatever the charge, by exposing those who had fled Portugal and come to Belem. The captain-general addressed him, "Tell me, my friend, what you know of Dom Plehve and where he has gone."

"I saw him come here with you, captain, but I did not see him leave. The mulatto girl said he raced off in a carriage toward the stables. Your sergeant said he left there on horseback to go upriver."

"We will search all the plantations," the captain-general said. "I am required to find him. I must deliver him to the ship before its sailing time. It could mean my life and my career." Taking Tomas by the arm, he said, "Come, Senor Gomez. My throat is very dry and I am sure we could both do with a drink. My patrol will be here shortly and I have a long ride ahead."

As the two men made their way through the traffic, Tomas thought of his comfortable home. It was on a large avenue, and had a wide porch, thick walls, and flowers and fountains in the

courtyard. Inside, was his wife, she who had shared all his trials. And Dom expected him not only to rob the bank, but to leave her. He must soon decide. If he left, as Dom demanded, she would be alone. But at least she would be alive.

As the two men entered the saloon, the crowd showed the captain-general the dead body of the man killed by Swede, the pirate.

"A sailor killed him, captain," said a bystander.

"Where is he?"

"He left a few minutes ago."

"My God!" The captain ordered Becker and his men to attention and they all pounded down the street in pursuit, the hoofbeats sounding loud upon the cobblestones.

The sergeant rode beside the captain-general. His mind had been churning ever since he had freed his superior from the closet. In a far corner of the cabinet, he had discovered a sword. He was about to call attention to it when he saw the inscription in Hebrew, "Next Year in Jerusalem." It was his father's sword! Yes, Solomon ben Adhem's weapon. He must somehow recover it. How did it come to be there? As he rode at a gallop, his mind grappled with the puzzle.

The troops rode out of sight and Tomas walked down the street to the auction yard. Gentle ocean breezes rocked the tops of high palms that bordered the broad avenue. The scent of spices mingled with the salty smell of the Atlantic. But these passed unnoticed today. He walked through a shed where cages, made of iron posts and railings, stood with doors open, ready for the next shipment of slaves. The ground was packed hard and gave forth the offensive odor of human waste. Flies swarmed overhead and ants and other insects crawled slowly over the ground. He walked into a small office where a clerk was busily occupied with some papers. The man looked up and nodded and Tomas opened a far door.

Perhaps thirty men were assembled, many of them dressed as Tomas. But some, too, were workers and had come from their shops. In eight years the Belem group had prospered—many were successful businessmen.

Tomas was the leader of the group. All talking ceased as the men waited for him to speak. "I am sorry to be late," he said,

"but many events have transpired in the last few hours. They will have a vital effect on us all." He removed his hat and one of the younger men jumped to his feet to place it on a shelf. "Sergeant Becker and his patrol are with the captain-general in pursuit of Dominick Plehve."

There was an immediate response from Doctor Jacob ben Joseph, a merchant of wool hides. "We know you have been blackmailed by this evil man, Tomas."

"There is more. If Dominick Plehve is captured and returned to Portugal, he could gain favor with the king and possibly win his freedom by reporting that the most prosperous merchants and tradesmen in Belem are Jews who escaped the Inquisition in Portugal."

Everyone sobered and their minds filled with memories of past pogroms. All their wealth, money, materials, and property would be confiscated—a rich prize for the authorities!

Jacob stood and, with arms outstretched, he asked, "What are we to do, Tomas?"

"Dom has ordered me to bring money from the bank to him and say goodbye forever to Belem. I am to respond quickly."

There was heavy silence as the men pondered what they had heard. Tomas continued quietly. "Another item, based only on rumor, is that Captain Gann, the pirate, has sunk a disabled Dutch-India ship north of here. All hands were lost except for two men. One of the dead was a son of Menassah ben Yakov named William." Tomas held up his hand at the sad murmur. "I know. I too am bowed with grief, for all our lives were lengthened by Menassah's help and I know how he would grieve for his son. One of the survivors we do not know. The other is a red-headed man of great size and strength. It is possible he is the son of Kurtsev Bolinski." Every man leaned forward, for the name was like a trumpet call to them. Tomas continued. "It is also said that during their siege, this man lost his leg."

"Where is he now?" asked Jacob.

He is being cared for in the Indian village of Chief Lamoni. The pirate is hunting both survivors. He must kill them—otherwise their testimony could hang him!"

Jacob ben Joseph then spoke. "One of our brothers is in need of our help. This may well preserve our own lives."

Falsehood and misfortune have been familiar partners to all of us, but if we remain quiet, we will be destroyed. We have the means, the training, and the need to take positive action in this matter." He raised his hand high above his head. "Let us take the sword, the knife, and the gun and fight for our rights in this land."

Every man rose to his feet. "We have allowed scoundrels and thieves to buy their way to positions of influence. Our officials are corrupt and it is a disease without remedy." Jacob raised his hands in supplication. "Beware, my friends, beware of corruption."

Tomas put his hand on Jacob's shoulder and his voice rose above the clamor. "The good doctor not only has the audacity to speak his mind, but the genius to speak it magnificently. But we must not openly commit acts of aggression. We will organize and do what we can to avert trouble, but Dominick Plehve must *not* be allowed to return to Portugal. I will take some gold to him and pretend I am still his man. We will overpower him and whoever else supports him."

There was enthusiastic agreement, especially among the younger men. One of these, a young blacksmith, stood beside Tomas.

The clerk came in quietly and whispered to Tomas. "A messenger is here from Senora di Almagro. He says he has an urgent missive." Tomas followed the clerk and turned to see one of Tibela's Indians.

"Did the senora send you?" asked Tomas.

"No, senor, Chief Lamoni sent me." The young man was nervous.

"Well, what is his message, my boy?"

"He says the man with one leg will soon be at the senora's home and Dom Plehve is waiting for him. You should come, for there is trouble. Now!"

"You have done well. We will do as he says." The Indian smiled, showing strong white teeth.

As Tomas reentered the room, the powerful young blacksmith spoke. "I, Abraham, am volunteering to help you in any way that I can, and many others feel the same way."

"Thank you, Abraham, I will need your help. I have just learned that Dom Plehve is at the Almagro home and that

Kurtsev Bolinski's son is expected. I leave at once. Can you come with me?"

As the young man nodded vigorously, Tomas continued, "I need someone to go as far as Berko's stables in a coach. I don't know what we will find, but I feel something is happening there."

Jacob ben Joseph came forward. "I have my carriage here, Tomas, and I will be glad to go with you."

"We will disperse then, but remember, do not all leave at one time. It will cause suspicion," Tomas warned the group.

Tomas, Abraham, and the doctor, rode in Jacob's coach toward the stable.

Abraham was the first to descend. He walked with confident strides down the passageway between the stalls. It was dark and cool and, as he adjusted his eyes from the dimness, he called out, "Is anyone here?"

A slight stirring on the packed ground caught his attention. He stepped back quickly when he saw Feijao, the crippled little boy, huddled against the wooden partition of the box-stalls. The child was barely conscious and unable to move. His thin back was covered with dried blood.

"What is it?" asked Tomas.

"It's Feijao. He has been beaten badly," Abraham said angrily.

"Bring him into Berko's room. Lay him on the bed and Jacob can examine him," said Tomas.

Jacob ben Joseph had gone to his carriage for his small medical bag. It was never far from his person.

Abraham gently lifted the whimpering boy into his great arms and carried him like a broken doll. He laid the boy on the cot, clenched his hands into tight fists, and then walked back into the passageway in long strides as though he might find an answer. He did find the whip and winced as he saw the blood and shreds of flesh on one end of it.

Jacob called, "He is very weak. I will take him back to my home and care for him there. He spends most of his time with Berko, so he probably hasn't been missed. Carry him to my carriage, Abe, and we'll be on our way."

The doctor stepped back from the bed and Abraham carefully lifted the boy. As they came out of the room, Feijao's eyes looked up at Abraham. He raised his hand to point across the barn at the stairway. The blacksmith stopped and turned to the two men.

"He is trying to tell us something." The boy looked at the men and nodded his head, again feebly pointing to the stairs. It took Abraham only a moment to climb up. Then he looked at the loft. Loose hay was stacked against one side and he saw the mangers below. The boy pointed to the loose hay.

Tomas searched for a moment, then exclaimed, "Here it is! Dominick's chest. I have seen it before."

"What's in it?" asked Abraham.

"I do not know, but we will turn it over to the captain-general. Perhaps it holds something of interest to us all. I will carry it to the carriage while you take the boy." In a few moments, the carriage departed. The doctor, the sick boy and the chest were headed toward the city and the captain-general.

Tomas open the box-stall, talking gently, and put his hand on the shoulder of a gentle gray mare. He carefully placed the halter up over her nose and ears, then buckled the throat latch.

Abraham led a stallion outside and after a few circles, tightened the cinch. He stepped confidently into the saddle, in full control.

The two men lifted their horses into a slow gallop and crossed a shallow stream, thus beginning the short ride to Tibela di Almagro's mansion.

Tomas steadied his elegant hat as they rode along. The mare had a smooth canter and he felt his spirit lift at the thought of facing action once again.

The stallion was somewhat wild, but Abraham had the hands of a true horseman and sat easily, with style and pride.

As they entered the road leading toward the senora's home, Tomas was shocked at how rundown the place appeared. Weeds grew between the cobblestones, trees were untrimmed, and beautiful flowers and herbs were unattended. But, he reasoned, without money she was unable to use her people for anything but crops. There were many acres of sugarcane and

thousands of head of cattle to care for. These things had to come first, of course.

An Indian boy came up to Tomas as they stopped before the veranda. "Senor Plehve has left," he said, "and taken the senora's son." He pointed toward the towering green trees of the jungle. Tomas and Abraham dismounted and walked toward the steps. The Indian boy followed and spoke again. "Senors, many things have happened. The big man with one leg, he comes with his friend, and then too comes the Sergeant Becker with soldados. They have gone to find the child."

"Did they go alone?"

"There were four soldados, four of my people's warriors, and two caboclos, field workers."

"How long have they been gone?"

"The soldados go first, the senora and others leave for the jungle a small time ago, just before I return."

Tomas beckoned to Abraham and they went up the wide wooden steps across the veranda into the cool interior of the house. An Indian girl appeared and Tomas ordered food and drinks. As they waited, he made some notes.

"Hadn't we better start after them, Tomas?" Abraham asked, looking doubtfully at what Tomas was doing. "Drawing things on paper won't get them back. I would like to put my hands on whoever beat that crippled boy back at the stable."

"I think I know the answer, Abraham, but I will tell you about that at a later time. And we need Dom alive."

"You said you wanted him dead so he can't testify against us."

"I mean to get enough evidence against him so that the captain-general will hang him. We can leave that part to Sergeant Becker."

"All of this is confusing. And what's that got to do with getting the senora's little boy back?"

"Dom Plehve has him. He is also after slaves and gold. He plans to meet me in two days at the river's bend across from Marajo Island. The pirate, Captain Gann, will be nearby with barges and canoes. His ship will be at anchor offshore."

"Dom will send someone to the stable for his chest. You will be there to meet him, my friend. I suspect he whipped the

child. Remember, he is a large, powerful man and carries a razor-sharp knife. He has killed two men in the short time he has been in the city. He is without fear. So you must get help."

Abraham's eyes gleamed with excitement. "I'll need no help, Tomas. That is a job I can put my heart into. I had best be getting back then."

"Yes. It's too bad we didn't know of this before we left the city. However—I will send someone to tell the senora of our plans. Then I will find Chief Lamoni and ask his warriors to help us."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Scott finally admitted that he needed assistance. He and Jens fashioned a tree limb into a walking stick to help him through soft and muddy places on the trail. It also protected him from such as snakes. Once he killed a boa constrictor that had dropped onto Jens, crushing it with the stick.

"God Almighty!" shouted Jens as Scott dragged away the snake. "What a goddamned country!" He shuddered as the reptile twitched erratically about the vines and roots in its death throes.

Tibela's hand crept into Scott's and was cold as she clung to him. Julio, the guide, laughed when he saw the carcass. He smiled and rubbed his belly.

"Good, good food. You want me make fire and cook?" He looked up at Jens who was white-faced. "No?" He then turned to Scott. "Puka's camp ahead, and empty except for old ones."

Scott went cautiously forward. The two caboclos were waiting for him as he neared the clearing. Suddenly he saw Sergeant Becker and just behind him a great jungle cat, poised and ready to leap. Scott gave no thought to personal safety. He shouted and ran forward, waving his heavy walking stick in the

air. "Becker! Moses!" he yelled, rushing ahead. His voice shattered the morning stillness.

The sergeant was shocked to hear his name called out. He spun about and stared, startled by Scott's waving and shouting.

The jaguar had been on the dinner trail for several hours. He had eaten humans before and preferred them to other living things. They were more than just food. They were enemies! His hatred and hunger made him a great enemy. Now he turned toward this new challenger that bellowed like a trumpeting elephant. With teeth bared and claws extended, he leaped, hurling himself forward. The beast felt a flash of fear before he landed, for this human had not rushed to flee. His mouth was fully opened and his white teeth gleamed within the snarling red mouth.

Scott held his stick in both hands as the huge cat leaped through the air as though shot by a cannon. He pushed the club forward with all his strength. The peg leg was planted firmly in the ground behind him to prevent slipping. As the club smashed into the screaming red mouth, the cat fell back into the grass. But its muscular body rolled quickly to regain its balance. Before it could slash him with its razor-sharp claws, Scott brought the club down heavily on its skull—finally killing the great cat.

Julio and the sergeant had guns cocked and ready. Now the warriors gave shouts of victory and Scott felt relief when he looked at the beast lying at his feet.

"Never have I seen such a thing. My friends will not believe me when I tell them. They will say that I was full of the liquor." Julio motioned wildly for the others to come and look.

Tibela's face lost all color when she understood what had happened. Her hand went out to steady herself on Moses' arm. Scott was confused for he had thought she would reach out to him. He wanted to hold her. But Moses was the one to whom she called for strength. Even now her other hand was on the sergeant's arm. Scott turned away.

"Just look at those teeth marks!" Jens held up Scott's club, feeling it with his fingers. "He could have ripped your arm off, man." He pointed to Julio. "I suppose you will want to cook and eat the cat, too."

The guide laughed. "I smell cooking coming from the

village. Perhaps there is food waiting for us." As they talked, Julio rolled the gray spotted cat on its back, made a cut down the center, and prepared to skin it.

"If you hadn't been here, Scott," Moses observed with dry humor, "it would have ended my military obligations." He grinned, then spoke to Tibela. "I think there is a white woman at the village."

"Let's hurry then," Tibela said. "She may know of my son."

As they came in sight of the cannibal village, they heard the shouting of the old priest. "Snakes will rain down on your heads," he scolded them, "and your souls will burn in the everlasting pits of hell."

Jens clapped his hand on his forehead and sadly exclaimed, "No, not him again!"

The priest's darting eyes saw Scott, who stood out above the others with his hair like a red flag in the jungle. "The Jew has come to bring curses on this village," he screamed. "Here comes one who scoffs at our Lord. God will smite his other leg to punish him for his wicked ways." He held the iron cross in his hand high above his head and the loose sleeve falling away from his arm revealed filthy skin, crawling with vermin.

Jens faced the priest, but stayed well back from him as Tibela, Scott, and Moses went toward a young white woman standing nearby. She smiled tentatively at Scott for she remembered him.

"You are Roseanna?" Scott asked.

She nodded. He introduced the others. "Senora di Almagro and Sergeant Becker." The girl nodded her head to Tibela, but when she looked at Moses, her eyes held his.

Tibela saw and wondered. Did Moses know this girl? Intensely she asked Roseanna, "Please, I am searching for my little boy. He is only five and was kidnapped by Dominick Plehve. Have you seen him?"

The priest shouted, "Yes!" before Roseanna could answer. "That devil was here with your child, but they have fled before the wrath of God. They have crossed the Sangre del Rio. You will never see your son again." He pointed at Tibela and then continued. "It will be with him as others. These heathens cooked the flesh of the children of Chief Lamoni. And I warned him what would happen."

Scott's lips turned white and he raised his arm to shut off the words. The priest stopped yelling and drew back from the expected blow. Scott put his arm around Tibela's waist to support her, for she had paled and was trembling so much she could scarcely stand.

The priest then directed himself to Jens. "And you, you worshipper of the devil, the bloody bellies of the sharks and crocodiles are not satisfied with only your godless shipmates. They want you and they shall have you because you are contaminated. You have knowingly embraced the Jew and God will punish you." So intense was the padre, so angry and vitriolic, that he leaned over too far and would have fallen except that Jens caught him by his filthy robe. It silenced him for a moment. Then he swung his arm around and struck Roseanna. "Get away from me. You tried to push me over," he hissed.

The effort was too much for the old man and he went into a coughing fit—a relief to the others for it ended his ravings. Tibela spoke apprehensively, "We must leave this horrid place. My Roberto is not here. We must hurry to find him."

Thunder rolled ominously in the distance and clouds were again building up. Julio came forward carrying the jaguar skin rolled into a bundle.

Roseanna joined them. "The priest does not know what he is saying. He was once kind and helped people. Now his mind is going and he gets into these senseless rages."

Thunder sounded and Julio spoke again. "We must make camp for soon we will have much rain."

"I know just the place," said Moses. "There is a clear stream of water with red sand at the bottom, a fine place to bathe and camp. It is near . . .!" He stopped talking and his face began to redden. He felt Roseanna's eyes on him. He couldn't face her for now she knew that he had seen her naked.

Men had always looked at her with greedy eyes, but as she had walked the jungles with the priest, no one had laid hands on her. She was contemptuous of most men and felt a flaming anger to think that Moses had hidden and looked on her when she was alone. Such a man was not a man at all, she thought. How could she have gazed at him with a stirring in her heart?

This soldier was worse than most. With set lips, she turned away from him.

The others had started down the trail, but Moses lingered behind. Finally he asked, "Roseanna, please come with us? I would carry the priest."

Moses knew by her look of contempt that the answer was no. Without speaking, she turned her back and went into a shanty with the father.

Moses shuddered with revulsion as his thoughts followed the girl into the vermin-infested hut. There she would care for the needs of a mad priest. He wanted desperately to take her away from such a vile place.

As a sergeant, however, he had orders from the captain-general to capture Dom Plehve. Already one soldier had been killed and he was further from completing his assignment than when he had started. He moved swiftly down the trail to catch up with the others, while his hopes for the future remained behind with the woman.

Tibela lay wide-eyed in her blanket on the floor. Bolts of lightning struck the earth with such force that she could feel the ground tremble beneath her. Huge drops of rain water fell in a constant stream from the canopy of trees above their tent. Lit torches gave off dim light and she could see the huddled forms of Indians keeping guard against stalking beasts. She shuddered as she thought of the huge cat Scott had killed. She looked over at his sleeping form and it comforted her that he was there. Where was her little Roberto? Was he out in this hideous night, a captive of the cannibals?

Her fearful thoughts of Dominick Plehve drove sleep from her and she lay as though feverish. She dreaded the night and its jungle sounds. But the day was worse for it brought out all the vile insects, snakes, and hungry creatures.

Scott was not asleep, although he was exhausted from the day's efforts on a wooden leg. He fought the jaguar over and over again in his mind and realized how close he had actually come to death. Yet, he felt a glow of satisfaction in having successfully matched his strength with the worst the jungle offered: for nothing on earth was superior to a fully matured jaguar.

His thoughts turned to Tibela and her reaction to the killing. He was beginning to realize just how emotionally involved he had become. He closed his eyes and she was there; her figure, her luxuriant hair, her smile. He would give his life if he could have her with him forever—but what had he to offer?

He became aware of small sounds of fright escaping Tibela's lips. Should he comfort her? She must be terribly concerned about her boy—another man's child! The thought was a torment to him. His body tensed waiting as he listened. He saw her shadowy shape in the fire's flickering glow. His loins strengthened with the thought of drawing her close. The wise course, he felt, would be to return her to her home and launch a proper search for the boy. But she would push on alone, if necessary. He knew that and understood her need.

Tibela lay listening to the quiet breath of the big man, so near and yet so far from her. If only her husband could have had one portion of his strength, she could have given her life gladly into his care. But he had been a libertine and dissolute, with no qualities she could respect. With a feeling of desperation, she was glad Roberto's father was missing for she did not want him contaminating the boy's young mind with his twisted and decadent values. If only Scott had fathered her baby! They would both have been safe from such as Dominick Plehve. Her eyes crossed the shadows and met the steady gaze of the man.

Suddenly, a burst of white lightning exploded nearby and the penetrating smell of brimstone and sulphur caused Tibela to scream and catapult herself into Scott's arms. He cradled her close against his bare chest until her trembling slowed. His hands against her back drew her to his body. His arms went around his neck, lifting her against his ribs, and she did not know if the thunder in her ears was his heart or hers. But it did not matter. She lifted her lips to his.

Scott looked down for a long moment and then, with a groan, his mouth shut on hers. She was his—she had to be! His hands moved under her skirt to draw her closer still.

"Mi amor," Tibela whispered, "mi enamorado." Scott loved her with mounting passion and the storm raged in a frenzy outside their safe retreat.

At last he held her gently. "I will never leave you now, beloved. You are mine and no man can take you from me.

Know that, my little one. What is mine, I keep." He kissed her forehead.

Sleepily she replied, "Shh, manana is tomorrow. Tonight is ours, my love."

For Moses, in his own military lean-to, sleep came in little snatches. Thoughts moved in and out of his mind, some as dreams, some as half dreams, but mostly about Roseanna. All were torturous and made staying here through the night almost impossible. The rumble of thunder and the crash of lightning were a welcome relief. He pictured her standing by the water's edge, her beautiful body wet from the cool stream. He thought of her beauty. Then the vision faded into a horrible nightmare as he imagined the mad priest pulling her body close to his for comfort and warmth. Little Roseanna, so feminine, so desirable.

Then his thoughts went to Scott, not a boy, but a giant with courage to match the jaguar. He owed his life to him and now he was ready to offer it to Roseanna, if she would have it. Would daylight never come? He must go to her.

At last the rains stopped and the whole world seemed changed. A few large drops still fell from the tall mangrove trees, but there was silence except for that. Tibela's Indians stepped softly to take their positions on guard and Julio stuck his head in through the tent flap. He urgently announced that the waters were rising and camp must be broken. Scott touched Tibela's cheek with his finger, then left.

Jens pointed to the high canopy of trees above them. "Busy little beggars," he smiled as the birds broke the silence and the jungle came suddenly alive.

Scott walked briskly to his tent and was about to call out to Tibela when he heard her soft voice in Hebrew. It reminded him of his mother, a prayerful woman with great reliance on God. Suddenly he felt a strength, knowing that Tibela belonged to him. He was not a castaway, a drifter without roots. Hearing her soft words had a precious sound of familiarity and gave him courage for the day. Menasseh had once told him that God is far away, but prayer could bring one close.

Tibela came to him. There were two spots of color in her cheeks and Scott smiled and reached to take her hand. They moved out. Julio led the way with the rest following. A large

iguana lizard dropped in front of Jens, who stopped as though frozen, his mouth agape. The iguana gave him an idiotic stare, then turned and ran swiftly away. Julio ran after it and the animal stopped as a timid dog would, crouching down. He picked it up by the neck and carried it along toward the camp. Then he smiled at Jens. "It will go well in the cooking pot," he said.

It took Jens a moment to recover from the shock. "Filthy country, always something falling out of the damn wet trees," he complained. "And I don't think much of the food either. I thought I had tried everything aboard ship, but now I'm going to eat lizard." He made a wry face and marched along grumbling.

When they reached the village they found the priest seated on a mat, but there was no sign of Roseanna. As Scott came into view, the old cleric cried out, "Oh, God, have mercy on us. Here come the Jew and his infidel friend. The curse I predicted will now come to pass."

Moses hurried over. "Where is the woman?" he demanded.

The priest looked up at Moses. "The soldier has come to take away the Jew." He pointed at Scott. "Take him." Then he pointed at Jens. "And also that infidel, for he too has scoffed at God."

"The woman, where is she?" demanded Moses.

"What have you to do with the woman?" questioned the priest suspiciously.

"Perhaps she has taken food to the old ones of the village. They are not able to provide for themselves," suggested Julio.

Tibela looked at Scott. "We can leave some lizard meat for them, can't we? We'll lay it over the fire when we leave. It will get smoked and last for a few days."

Jens noticed Scott studying the Indian men. "Old Chief Lamoni would never have had trouble with pirates or cannibals if he'd had very many strong warriors like these," Jens said.

"The trouble is that his people are too scattered," Scott answered. Now he is moving his people close to Tibela's home where they can give her protection and at the same time fortify their tribal positions. Can we get hold of those guns you

salvaged from the *Nina Marie*, Jens? Could you carry them to the Indian camp? The chief can give you all the men that you need to move them."

"All we need is wheels under them. And that won't be easy." Jens looked over to Julio who was cooking the iguana. "I can smell that stinking lizard way over here," he grimaced. "Don't expect me to eat any of that!" Scott laughed at Jens' sour look.

At the sound of laughter, the priest roused and his voice thundered. "Where is that soldier and why hasn't he taken the Jew and the infidel out of camp? I'll put the curse of God on you, Tibela. I know you look for your son, but you will not find him. You have been contaminated." He waved his fists toward Scott.

Scott took Tibela's hand in his and drew her away from the cursing cleric. "Pay no attention to him. We will find Roberto. Dominick will protect him with his own life. He needs the ransom and a hostage for his own safety."

"I know that, Scott, but there are so many things can happen to a little boy." Her face showed the ravages of concern and the exhaustion of their search. But she looked lovingly up into Scott's shadowed face.

"What's the matter?"

"I wonder about my father's reaction when he learns that I have not only lost my leg, but the company's ship, cargo, and crew. And William, my sister's betrothed, is a slave. I have certainly failed in all that I set out to do."

Tibela lifted Scott's hand to her lips in wordless comfort.

Moses ran excitedly into the village, shouting, "Roseanna says that she has learned from the old people where the Xingos go for slaves. And she will lead us there."

"I have only been a few miles up the Xingo River that the old people have told me of, but I will show you all that I can," offered the girl.

Moses spoke quickly. "We will stretch a mat between two poles and carry the priest on a litter."

"We're ready to hit the trail," Jens called, "the litter is ready." The priest was lifted up screaming and cursing.

"God Almighty, have mercy on me," cried Jens. "I'll have to stuff cotton in my ears or gag him, one or the other. Damn country, nothing goes right!" As they passed a small group of elderly natives huddled at the river's edge, Roseanna showed them the food over the fire. They understood, but none gave any indications he had heard.

By noon they reached the rapids of the Xingo River and the deafening sound thundered in their ears. The noise drowned the screaming complaints of the priest and the little group moved over the steep trail rapidly. The guides, Julio and Silva, swung their machete knives back and forth, opening a trail. The watchful Indian guards were vigilant, for danger was everywhere. It took several hours of laborious climbing to reach the cascades. At the top, great boulders were bombarded with rushing water. Trees riding the current above the falls were splintered to kindling by the time they reached the large pools at the bottom.

"I never saw anything this big or this noisy before," panted Jens. "Half the water in the world must be going past here. Nothing could ever go over this cliff, hit the boulders below and live."

No one had time to answer for they were all walking very cautiously. A fall would be disastrous. The forest had thinned and they were now into great stands of hardwood trees and open grassy areas. Julio at last picked a shaded place for a midday stop. The sun was hot out of the forest's heavy canopy and the heat of summer made everyone extremely uncomfortable.

The priest was set down next to a tree and Jens and Moses rubbed their hands where blisters were forming. Jens held out his hands. "Thorns and now pole blisters," he lamented. "This country is sure hard on a man."

The priest motioned with clawlike fingers for Jens to come to him. "Come, my son!" he said. "Confess your sins and let the light of Christ shine into your soul." A thin smile cracked the leathery old face. Jens looked at him with a wary eye.

Julio was scrambling turtle eggs that Silva had found and he turned to watch Jens. Soon everyone was looking with gleeful grins.

Roseanna came over and spoke softly into Jens' ear. "Senor, please him, for he is living in the past when many people traveled to have his blessings. Perhaps the madness is leaving." Her eyes were soft and pleading and Jens suddenly knelt before the cleric.

The priest's robes were foul as his body. Vermin crawled over his hands and, as the folds of the black sleeves parted, they revealed his outstretched arms, with the marks of skin worms.

Jens clamped his jaws shut to hold back an oath as the priest placed both hands on his bare head. As the old man prayed, his fingertips worked into the roots of Jens' hair and the gunner was ready to back off. But the padre seemed to anticipate his thoughts and held him fast. The prayer was in Latin, spoken slowly and softly, and then he released Jens' hair. "You may go now, my son, but stay close to my side. We shall pray together often that your soul may be saved."

Eggs were served along with some cooked strips of lizard and the priest accepted food only if it was offered by Jens. He seemed to have forgotten Roseanna as he ate greedily.

Jens confided to Scott, "The old faker, he is doing all this praying so he can get me to take that woman's place. I am not going to put up with it, Scott, and that's final."

Further comments were cut off when the priest called, "My son, come, bring my water, for I thirst."

Jens got up, mumbling that maybe it was better to be waiting on the old man than to have him screaming. He asked, "How about you taking a turn with him, Scott? You could do with a little confessing and blessing."

Scott laughed and put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "You're right, of course. I am a sinner, the same as you, but you're on the inside track and it's keeping him quiet. Carry on a bit longer, lad."

The priest called out again, "Water, my son."

"I'll take him water all right, but I need to throw it on him. He stinks and he's crawling with vermin. I've got an itching scalp right now, probably full of his lice." Jens took a bowl of water and watched as the little priest sucked it into his mouth.

"Thank you, my son." The priest handed back the bowl.

Jens appeared disgusted as he returned to Scott. "I can't understand his turning nice. It'll pay to keep an eye out to see what he's up to."

A few hours later, they came to a fork in the river. Roseanna said, "I have never been beyond the village just ahead. We will soon meet some of their hunters. The priest was allowed to come here, but I am not sure how they will act toward our group. Perhaps I should take the padre and go first."

"If there is danger, I will go with you," Moses said firmly.

"Well, shall we sit the old boy down or do we just stand here popping blisters on our hands?" Jens grumbled, then motioned for Moses to set the priest down. Suddenly, Jens picked up the little man, walked to the edge of the bank, and jumped into the stream. Roseanna screamed and her hand went to her throat. Moses rushed to her and she leaned trembling against him. Scott and Tibela hurried to the edge of the bank and watched.

"Doesn't Jens know that there are piranha in these waters?" Tibela asked Scott anxiously.

Jens popped up on the water's surface holding the priest. The water was shallow and he easily carried the old man to shore. Roseanne and Moses had reached to help them out of the water when the smiling priest took a handful of water, dribbled it over Jens' head, and then intoned several sentences in Latin. "I have baptized you, my son. Now you are a Catholic," he said.

Water streamed from the cleric's heavy black robe as Jens, with a heavy scowl, carried him into the sunshine, and called for a mat. Roseanna brought it and Jens set the priest down. He smiled into Jens' face. "Thank you, my son," he said.

Julio and Silva came running into camp to report, "The people of the village are gone. Only the witch doctor is there. We can pass in safety. Beyond is the Sertao. It is a bad place, where natives are taken for slaves."

Soon everyone was in a deserted camp, similar to Puka's. "It's beastly," said Tibela, as she held her hand over her nose.

Though the cannibals had fled, they had left food in the abandoned shanties. Seated on a wooden platform overlooking the river was the witch doctor. Human skulls hung on posts and

a monkey grinned from the back of his chair. The old native stared under incredibly bushy eyebrows. His chest was bare and every rib was clearly defined.

"Where are your people?" Scott asked in the awkward Indian dialect that he had learned in his weeks with the tribe of Chief Lamoni.

The old man rolled his eyes over the group, stopping as he recognized the priest and then moving on to Roseanna. He looked at Scott. "Gone," he answered.

"I can see that. Are they coming back? It looks like they left in a hurry."

"No, they will not return. The good ones were taken for slaves. The others have fled to the jungle."

"Was there a white man here?"

"Yes."

Tibela rushed forward and looked at him, pleadingly. "There was a small white boy. Did you see him?"

The old savage cackled, showing his black-filed teeth. "See him? I ate him!"

Tibela reeled and Scott threw his arm out to steady her.

From behind them thundered the voice of the priest. "You lie, and I'll call down a curse on your heathen head!"

The witch doctor jumped and help up a hand in supplication, his eyes wide with fright. "The white boy is alive. I lied. No curses, I have suffered enough."

Scott intervened. "The white man is wanted by the soldiers." He pointed to Moses. "We must catch him before he takes the slaves to the ships at sea. Tell us how we can find him."

"They travel up this river until they take enough slaves. There are several ways to go," the old man continued, "and I cannot know the path. There is danger and death all around. Take with you much drinking water. Your trail is away from the river and you will soon be into the Sertao."

Julio and Silva were uneasy. "Senor Scott," Julio shivered, "Few white men, and never a white woman, go into the Sertao and live. Perhaps there is another way."

An Indian boy ran toward Scott, breathless, his eyes wide with fear as he pointed excitedly down the trail. "You must stop them," he exclaimed. "They kill my people and take them for

slaves." His cheeks were tearstained and he trembled with fear. Suddenly he stared at Scott's wooden leg and turned his face away.

Tibela touched Scott's arm, her eyes pleading and full of hope. This was the work of Puka and Dominick Plehve. Now they would find her son.

"Your name?" asked Scott.

"I am Willi. They are only a short distance ahead of us. We must help my people." There was panic in his voice and doubt on his face as his eyes flickered briefly again to the wooden leg. Could this crippled giant of a man actually help?

Scott motioned the men to follow his lead. Any doubt the boy had was dispelled when he saw Scott's quick forward movement.

The boy carried a machete easily, as did all the other men, ready to use at a second's notice.

Tibela was directly behind Scott and her guards followed, their eyes searching the brush and treetops for sight of the enemy. As the path narrowed, they had to walk single file. Then when the trail widened, the guards came to her side. Suddenly Willi signaled the group to stop.

Scott went forward with the boy. He pointed beyond a wild growth of ferns and flowers. Monkeys screamed in the tall trees and small groups of parrots flashed by, their bright green feathers in contrast with the dark jungle-green of the trees.

Scott saw the destruction of yet another village before him, but a swift look around convinced him that Tibela's child was not among the dead. He must, however, protect her from the sight.

Tibela's eyes were wide and anxious as she searched Scott's face for news.

"No, Tibela, we have not yet found him," Scott said, gripping her hand, and they continued along the wearying trail.

Chapter Thirty

Julio ran alongside Scott and held out a restraining hand. "Senor, one moment please. The boy could be leading us into a trap."

"Willi is not lying. The village is destroyed. No, I do not believe that he tells untruths."

Tibela hurried to Scott. "What is the matter? We are so close. Why are we not going forward to find my son?"

"Julio thinks we may run into a trap."

"It is possible," Julio explained, "that Senor Plehve knows we are following. He has many warriors and if they wait for us, we will also be taken as slaves or butchered like lambs. We can only follow and hope to find your little son at night."

Tibela was ready to argue, but Sergeant Moses Becker spoke. "Tibela, Julio is right. However, I think we may continue very slowly and carefully."

Tibela's whole demeanor shrank and she raised questioning eyes to Scott. He saw the tears. Then she dropped her head into her hands as sobs shook her slender shoulders.

Scott drew her close and her tears flowed for a few moments. She looked up with drenched eyes and a tentative smile

trembled on her lips. He rose and held her, thinking that two nights in the rain forest, miles of walking plagued by insects, and constant fear of attack by man and beast had taken their toll on the princess. "Tibela," he said, "we must go on." He kept her hand in his as they moved along the trail.

Silva motioned and whispered, "Come look." On the waters of the Xingo River many bark canoes and rafts could be seen. The Indian slaves were rowing with rhythmic strokes slowly across the yellow waters. But Dominick Plehve, the cannibals, and their captives were soon lost to sight. The far green shoreline shimmered emptily in mist and haze of heat.

Tibela's eyes searched hungrily in vain for some sign of Roberto. Scott took her hand and they walked over to Jens and the priest.

The padre looked up and smiled as he called them to gather around. "Come, come, my children, for this is a long-awaited day." His eyes searched them. "Where is my daughter, Roseanna? Oh, there you are," he said. "Come, my child. This is the day I will forgive your sins." Roseanna looked around, her eyes wide and questioning. "Come, my child," he called to her again. "Come to me."

With hands clasped to her breasts, Roseanna dropped to her knees before him. With his head back and his eyes closed, the priest intoned his blessings and forgiveness in Latin.

The roar of a crocodile in a distant marsh broke the priest's reverie and he opened his eyes and looked on the bowed head of the girl before him. "You may rise," he said, "for your sins are forgiven. You may go in peace."

Roseanna raised her head and was about to stand when the priest lifted a restraining hand. "It is necessary, my daughter," he said, "that you do not sin again, for then there may never be forgiveness. You must marry and have the protection of a good man." The priest searched the faces of those gathered around him. Moses took a step forward but the priest held his arm out to Jens. "This man shall be your husband, my child. He was an infidel but by his gracious attitude toward me he has shown his repentance. We have been in the waters together where I have baptized him and washed away his sins. He is Catholic now and will become your husband."

Roseanna and Jens looked at one another, stunned. They

could, for the moment, offer no protest. White-faced, Moses moved to Roseanna and put his hand on her arm as she looked up at him, bewildered. The priest spoke to Moses with a thin smile. "How kind of you," he said, "to come forward as a witness to the wedding. I will perform the service now."

Tibela went down on one knee beside the priest. "Father, let us prepare the bride and bridegroom properly. When we return to my home, we shall have a proper wedding."

The priest raised his head. "The desire these children have for one another may not wait until then, my daughter. Sin would come into their lives and their souls would then burn in hell. No, we shall not wait."

Scott could see that Jens was preparing to fight or run when suddenly a gunshot shattered the air. Everyone froze in position. Then came a thump as a native fell from high branches of a tree above them. Blood oozed from a hole in his chest. Julio pointed to a long blowgun caught in the lower part of the tree.

"There will be others," Scott said briskly. "We must move to a place where we can protect ourselves."

They left the path by river and struck a trail that led to more open country. There they could defend themselves with guns and their enemies could not get close enough to use primitive weapons. Julio made a trail with his machete, hacking away poisonous and thorny stems. They could see animals watching as they moved swiftly along and they knew hostile natives were near. Death menaced them from every corner.

"Out there," announced Julio, "is the Sertao—scorched earth with deep cuts and dry riverbeds. It is the land of the snake." He turned to Scott—a decision must be made! "What do we do now?"

Scott knew they should abandon the search for Tibela's son. They would be going to their deaths, all of them, if they continued. With two women, a crippled priest and he, himself unable to move quickly, they could not have survived this long without the Indians.

Scott stood before the small group. Tibela remembered when she had first seen him, lying on a bed, burning with fever, ready to give up. Now he stood tall and commanding. He had proven himself on the trail and now all of the men looked to

him for leadership. A hot wind stirred his red hair and sunlight reflected its color like threads of copper. He looked like he belonged, as though this were his land, his country. Her attention returned to his words.

"Dominick Plehve will bring the captives down the river to the bottom of the falls. There is no other way. They will land at the village we have just passed and there build new barges and proceed to the bend of the river. They will stay north of Marajo Island waiting to meet the pirate captain. It is time now to return to the senora's home."

Tibela thought at first she had misunderstood. "Go back?" she said coldly. "Go back without my child? Never."

"Wait, hear us out," begged Scott. But he knew her mind was closed as she looked at him with contempt. "We will leave Julio and Silva here to watch the river and keep us informed. Sergeant Becker must report to his captain. We need help from the military. This is where the captain-general can capture Dominick Plehve and the cannibal chief. Here he can rescue the child and the slaves. I will come back with them." He spoke directly to Tibela, hoping his words had reached her.

"What about the wedding?" asked the priest. "We must delay that no longer."

Tibela considered her chances of going on alone. Her Indians would follow her. Perhaps even Julio and Silva. But where would she go? Canoes were needed to cross the river. It was likely that Dom Plehve had used all the boats he could find. She looked along the trail to the Sertao and saw the heat waves shimmering on it, the cliffs gnawed by hot winds and riddled by caves. They could be gone before she arrived—if she ever did arrive! No, Scott was right. Her anger must be contained. All of them had extended themselves beyond what she had any right to expect. She looked up into Scott's waiting eyes and nodded, defeated. "You are right. It's just—"

"I know," he said quietly, holding out his hand to her.

The group, led by Julio, went back to the river's trail and toward the abandoned village. Jens caught up with Scott. "My lad," he said. "You've got to get me away from that old priest. I value my freedom much indeed."

Scott, with a sober face, considered his friend. "You know, Jens, we have often made jokes about what a pretty lady might

do to you someday. Well, I'm telling you now, it couldn't happen to a finer man." He slapped Jens on the back.

"Right up to the altar, by God!" Jens gave a low odd whistle.

"Well, it might be a good thing for you. You are not getting any younger."

Jens spit and gave Scott a sour look. "That soldier boy, Moses Becker, has his eyes on her. She'd do just fine for him, but I'm not ready yet. If I ever get out of this damned jungle, and out to sea again, I'll never touch port. Phew, we're near that stinking camp. I can smell it."

Now the sound of the falls grew loud and Julio stopped. "We'll make camp here for the night," Scott said. "This is a good place, for the natives fear the angry waters. We'll be home by dark tomorrow."

As camp was set up, Julio took a ball of string and tied one end to a bush. He formed elaborate patterns on the ground.

"What is this, Julio?" asked Scott. "It look like a puzzle."

"It is a puzzle, senor. It stops the evil spirits from following us. They are curious and when they halt to figure out the meaning of the string, they forget their victims."

"You believe there are evil spirits following us?" asked Jens.

Julio stopped and looked up from his work. "Oh, yes. All of us have had bad things happen." He glanced at Scott's wooden leg. "The senora has lost her son. You have lost your ship. Bad spirits follow and will catch us when we sleep. No, we cannot take a chance." He went back to his work. The string was looped from the top of the brush to surround the whole camp. "The white also shows at night. The cannibals that would follow will see the puzzles and know that there are evil spirits. Then they will flee." He chuckled to himself as he considered his wisdom.

"Well, that makes me feel better," said Jens dryly. "Things have been bad ever since our captain went ashore. We need a bit of luck."

"Scott," he added, "what about William? Do you think we'll ever see him again?"

"Yes. Menassah sowed winners and William is Menassah's son. He will survive."

"It smells like more fish for dinner," complained Jens, "but I hope we're out of lizard."

"Old Chen Wong, the ship's cook, spoiled you, Jens."

Moses joined them. "I hope you don't think I put the old priest up to marrying me to Roseanna," Jens told them. "I'm just not the marrying type."

"No, I was only upset because I was afraid he was going through with it. She is a very religious girl and will do what he tells her."

Tibela came toward them and Scott thought her a picture of beauty. Sunlight filtering through the treetops flashed a soft warm glow on her head and shoulders. She saw his look and blushed pleasantly at the attention. "Did I hear someone talk about luck," she asked.

Scott and Jens looked at Moses. "Yes," he said. "I need some." He hesitated.

"Please, I didn't mean to intrude," replied Tibela.

"It's just that I am hoping to win Roseanna. You saved her from being married to old Jens. I am grateful."

"But there are problems, my friend." Tibela's eyes smiled at Scott. "But they can be solved. A man may earn that which he desires."

Jens threw his head back and chuckled. "His number one problem is to get her away from the priest or she will be married to me." The others joined his laughter.

The cleric heard and called to Jens. "Come, my son. I am ready for my meal."

"God Almighty! Me a Presbyterian and now nursemaid to a crazy priest." But the gunner went to attend his duties.

Then Scott asked, "Tibela, what do you know about Roseanna?"

"Really very little. Only what she has told me." Tibela's smile met his. "She is from Greece. Her father was a mercenary. He fought and lost in a battle and was sold as a slave. She never saw him again. At sixteen Roseanna was given in a marriage arranged by her mother. Her husband took her aboard a Dutch trading vessel on which he was an officer. The first night out he was knifed and died ten days later. The captain dropped her off at Belem. She contacted the priest and he told her she had sinned by not marrying a Catholic, that it had been adultery. You have heard him call her a whore."

Tibela drew a deep breath. "She found work at an inn, cooking, making beds, and serving tables. It happened, she was pulled onto the lap of a customer just as the priest came into the inn. The padre cursed the man and, as you know, he gave her the chance for penitence. She will do whatever he wishes. And she is only nineteen."

Moses watched Roseanna as she served the food on tree leaves to the hungry men. Her shiny dark hair flowed down her shoulders in a smooth braid and as she stooped over the open fire, her face reflected its red glow. "I've come to help you," he said, standing tall beside her with his hand out. For the first time her eyes were warm as she looked upward at him and her lips broke into a smile.

Then, without warning, an arrow pierced Roseanna's shirt, through the flesh of her side. Another pierced her thigh. She gave a muffled scream and fell to the ground. A shot from Moses' pistol brought an archer from the treetop, his falling scream a signal to savages charging out of the jungle. Moses stood astride Roseanna, his sword slashing and jabbing at the painted bodies of the assailants.

Scott used his club like a great hammer, pivoting on his wooden leg, and managing to keep the area about Tibela free. Her four Indian guards formed a defense line on her other side, but one of them got an arrow in the throat. He dropped his bloody machete and grabbed the shaft with both hands. As he pulled it free, he fell upon the ground. Tibela stood at Scott's back and used her pistol to shoot at the attackers. One bullet caught the savage who killed her guard and he fell at her feet.

Jens and Silva were standing beside the priest whose shouting voice could not be heard above the cries of battle. He waved his fist into the air. Then suddenly the savages were gone.

Tibela dropped to her knees beside Moses. He had removed the broken part of an arrow from Roseanna's side. He then took the shaft embedded in her thigh and, with an anguished look at those around him, gripped it strongly. Tibela lifted the girl's head onto her lap as Scott held the leg firm and Moses worked. A slit was cut in her trousers exposing firm white flesh. The skin was red and puckered around the arrow. With a paper

white face, Moses twisted firmly and jerked the arrow free. The tip however, was still firmly imbedded. Scott felt her leg shake with pain. Then, mercifully, she sank into unconsciousness.

Julio studied the arrow, then pointed to the bodies around them. "Yanoama," he said, his eyes wide with fear. "Yanoama is a name to strike terror into the hearts of men, senior. They live far up the river many miles and they come from the river of fever. They boil bark and herbs and drop the arrowhead into a poison called curare. See, the point is broken off. She might live if it is removed soon but, I feel sad to say, I think she will die."

"God Almighty!" shouted Jens. "You mean these buggers have the fever?" He looked at his blistered hands. "And me handling them with my sore hands." He ran to the river's edge and washed. "Damn country," he muttered.

"I have sucked blood from the wound and I found the arrow tip," Moses said. He dropped back onto his knees and placed his lips over the wound, trying to reach the point with his teeth. But it was far too deep. Scott held his knife over the hot flames and handed it to Moses. Many times over the years, Moses had been called on to assist in wartime surgery. But this was not the same. This girl he loved. Her eyes opened to see his white face and then the fire-blackened knife. Gently, without speaking, he placed a stick between her teeth. With wide eyes, she bit down on it.

While the remaining Indians plus Julio and Silva stood guard with loaded guns, Moses made a swift cut and Scott held the wound open. Moses found the point with his knife and removed it. With his lips, he drew as much of the poison and blood as he could. Tibela had strips of cloths ready and the cut was closed and bound. Moses muttered prayers that this crude care would suffice.

Roseanna was unconscious again. Tibela removed the stick from the girl's mouth and the teeth marks on it gave evidence of the agony she had suffered.

Julio spoke. "We cannot wait for morning, senior. It is dangerous to go down over the rocks to the river below, but it is more dangerous to stay."

Scott looked at the others, knowing this was no place to spend the night. He could see resolution on all faces.

Soon they reached the rapids and began to descend the rocky slopes with ropes. Tibela's guards had rattle sticks which they used to frighten the spotted ocelots, and huge jaguars. They also kept away Amahini—the evil spirits of the woods. Soon thunderous noises made the rattle sticks useless. Talking or even shouting was also impossible. It was difficult for Scott with his wooden leg, but he tried to laugh at his discomfort. He had strength and knew that he could survive any hardship. They made frequent stops and Scott saw Tibela often place her hand on Roseanna's forehead. She nodded and smiled at him. All right, so far, he thought.

They zigzagged back and forth, slowly descending to the level land of the jungle below. "It's hard for you, Scotty," shouted Jens as they finally reached the bottom of the rapids with the sound of the falls still rumbling in their ears. "But my bones are a lot older than yours. I tell you, once I'm aboard a ship again, that's it." When they reached a level grassy area, the men cleared space for the women to lie down and Moses checked Roseanna's leg. The bandages should be changed, but he needed daylight to see what he was doing. He looked at her and she smiled faintly through white lips.

Jens made the priest comfortable and then leaned against a dead stump. Suddenly, a *tacandira*, a poisonous ant, stung him on the leg. He tried to pull it off and another stung him on the hand. "Damn this country!" he hissed. Then he jumped and saw that he was sitting on an insect nest. Julio and Scott rushed over to help. Jens found another place to rest, searching the ground first and mumbling to himself.

Scott looked with amused pity at his unfortunate friend, then turned as Julio came up to him, grinning from ear to ear. He spoke excitedly. "The captain-general comes with many soldiers." Scott searched the darkness, letting his hopes run free. His thoughts wildly rejoiced. The future was shadowed, he thought, but for now, he felt they would achieve victory over the jungle!

Chapter Thirty-One

Captain Gann towered over the Indian messenger, then knocked him abruptly onto the deck. The Indian wiped blood from his mashed lips, his eyes reflecting hatred for the brutal pirate.

The captain held a written message from Dominick Plehve. He had been angry at the delay in getting word and his men were fighting among themselves. One had been killed and another wounded. Of course, they had tossed the injured man overboard. There was no room among his crew for the sick and ailing.

He squinted at the message. It read, "Have full cargo of slaves and gold. Meet me in four days at the cove. Attached map shows location."

It was a small inlet within the mouth of the Amazon River and north of Marajo Island. That was the area where the Dutch ship, the *Nina Marie*, had gone down.

The captain paced the deck, absorbed in his thoughts until he heard another fight break out among his men. He moved swiftly toward the disturbance, drawing his pistol. He knew

that he must keep a firm hand before they decimated their ranks to a danger point or perhaps tried to take over his ship.

The dispute ended before he got there, but now another man was dead. The victor drew his knife across the dead man's beard to cleanse it. He was a bull-necked pirate called "Ox," who had no friends and was always looking for trouble. Ox was unequalled in mob fighting and, for this reason alone, the captain respected him.

As Gann came forward, Ox turned, his knife in hand, the point directed toward the captain.

"Any complaints?" he demanded with a sneer in his voice.

The captain took no apparent interest in the death of his crewman, nor did he acknowledge the implicit challenge. "We move out on the tide," he calmly stated. "In four days, we pick up a load of slaves. There will be women and girls and they will keep the voyage from becoming dull for you."

There was a hearty cheer from some of the men and a few knowing grins. "I hope they bathe them. I hate dirty women," said one.

The captain paused, then spoke firmly. "There will also be gold." Now the cheers became loud and raucous. The captain added, "You lads can entertain yourselves with the Indian boy stretched out on the quarterdeck. Perhaps the Swede can show us some of his fine knife work."

Swede wished he were back in Belem with liquor and fights. He used his spare time honing his knife and exercising his huge muscles. He was a good worker, took orders and had a reputation for expertise with weapons. His interest in women was confined to torture and death. The big man stood with lips parted in a sinister grin, his razor-sharp blade in his hand.

"I expect you to clean up the deck when you are through," the captain said, pointing to two younger crewmen. "Go fetch the lad."

He planned to remain in his cabin during the activity. This victim would remain alive for some time. He had seen similar exhibits many times before and they no longer appealed to him. He grunted in satisfaction, for at least the men were pleased now. Slaves, women, gold—and now a new diversion to make them happy. They had been anchored for eight days—much too long.

"Hey, captain," called one of the men. "The Indian is gone."

Gann and his crew surveyed the spot where the Indian had lain on the deck. They decided the prisoner had jumped overboard. "He'll never make it through those shark waters," a seaman yelled.

The men turned restless again. There was no wind and it would be several hours before the tide would enable them to sail again.

"The Greek is dying anyway," the captain said. "You can have him if you want." He looked into the eyes of his men. What at first seemed protest changed gradually to assent. No one cared for the Greek and he would make one less to divide the loot with.

One is as good as another, the Swede thought as they moved to the lower deck to drag out the wounded Greek.

The captain called Blue to him. The ugly seaman was reluctant to miss the fun, but he was curious and followed the captain to his cabin. There Gann twisted the cork from a bottle and poured out some rum. "Drink up, lad," he said. "I have a job for you."

Blue downed his drink, suspiciously watching the captain over the rim of his glass. Then Gann took a ring from his pocket. "That belongs to the judge," Blue exclaimed. "I thought he gave it to the Swede."

"Dom Plehve did indeed give it to him and now I am giving it to you. Here, put it on your finger. It's yours to keep. The Swede can't go to Belem for he's a wanted man, accused of murder. *You* must go for the chest and bring it here. Take these coins and have a drink or two. But be careful. You are on an important errand. Come, I will help you lower the boat. And lad, stop by the docks and see how the good ship *Empresa* lies. Her hold should be near full now." He looked slyly at Blue. "I have in mind to take another ship and," he pointed at Blue, "I'll be needing me a captain." He gave the fellow a knowing look and a friendly slap on the back as they moved over to a small boat.

The Indian boy, Naphthali, made good his escape from the pirates. As soon as he reached shore, he rushed up the bank and started through the jungle trail back to Senor Dom. It was

the threat of death to his family that had forced him to become Dominick Plehve's messenger. His return with an answer was the only way he could possibly save them.

It would take him several hours. He threw all caution aside and, running headlong through the darkening rain forest, dodged hanging tree snakes and poisonous plants. He cringed at the cries of jungle cats and great birds.

He came suddenly upon a flock of vultures tearing at the flesh of an animal and he froze in terror. He caught sight of a piece of cloth that was shredded and bloody. As he looked closely, he saw that a fire had burned its edges. He pulled loose a dead limb from under a creeping vine and, using it as a club, moved forward toward the birds, driving them back.

A moment before he had been hot and sweating from the strenuous running, but now he was cold and his skin crawled. His heart thundered with panic. His mother had been wearing that cloth. Sick, he started to back away, but he had to know for sure. Was this his mother? His hand went to his gaping mouth and he sank to his knees in weakness. He felt a terrible pain in his gut, a sudden cramp, and then he vomited.

The birds became braver. Among the stumps of the trees, he saw stalking hyenas. He didn't care. He had to know! What of his sisters, father, and brothers? If he didn't return, they would also die—like this—if they had not already been killed.

No, they would be taken as slaves, to be sold in the markets of the world. But why had his mother been killed? It was too confusing. He stood up. Nothing could be done for her now, and she would want him to save the others.

As though she had spoken the words, he knew that she would wish it. Naphthali sped down the trail, eyes swollen, muscles cramped, and the taste of life bitter in his mouth.

He avoided the village of Puka, even though he knew that the cannibal chief and his tribe were with Dom Plehve. He passed near the camp of Scott at the lower level of the rapids. Through the tall grass and shrubs, he saw the shanties of the old witch doctor.

Back in the trees, well hidden, he found a bark canoe. With caution, he took it to the water's edge and soon was crossing the river to where Puka and Dom were herding their slaves.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The mangrove swamp came alive with the first light of day. Soldier monkeys scolded from high treetops and blue and yellow macaws sounded their alarm at the intrusion below. The caboclo workers heard with keen ears the scream of a hungry jaguar and paused in their work.

Scott turned to confer with Captain-General Manuel de Souza and Sergeant Moses Becker. They leaned against a huge boulder and looked out over the turbulent water. The far horizon was obscured by a huge plume of spray that rose from cascading waters and its distant roar filled the air.

"I will lead thirty men to the witchdoctor's camp," said the captain. "There we hope to capture Dominick Plehve and the cannibal chief, Puka, and free the captives. It is a good plan, for they cannot land further up. The cliffs are impassable." He pointed toward the falls. "And they cannot go over the falls and live. No, they must land here and we will be waiting. It will be a trap that I am most anxious to close on them."

A soldier brought a bowl of food for each man. The captain chewed for a moment, then continued. "Sergeant Becker, you will take a patrol of six men and accompany Senor Scott and his

party back to Senora di Almagro's home, giving them whatever assistance is required." He turned to Scott. "Now, I will hear the rest of your plan."

Scott liked the captain. He could make a decision and not sputter and fume like so many military men he knew. He had an open mind and would make a decision after hearing him out. Of course, the man did represent the crown. With Dominick Plehve on the run, the officer was responsible for all civil matters as well as military. It was important that the fugitive be caught. The captain-general could be dismissed or even arrested for dereliction of duty in letting a prisoner of the crown escape.

"Captain, it is fortunate for us that the banker, Tomas Gomez, has given us information linking Dominick Plehve to the pirates. We know their meeting place now. It is in the area where my ship was sunk." The captain glanced quickly at Scott's wooden leg and then looked away. "Yes, and where I lost my leg."

The captain was apologetic. "Please pardon my manners, senor, but after hearing how you killed a fully grown jaguar and seeing how you have made this incredible journey I had to assure myself that you do indeed have a wooden leg. You have indeed overcome your misfortune."

Scott's voice was quiet. "Well, not completely. As Sergeant Becker will tell you, I am not fleet-footed. I cannot run from danger. I must stand to face it."

"I doubt that you have ever run from danger, senor."

Scott smiled. "To go on with my plan—we have salvaged—at least my shipmate did—two long guns. Each is capable of lobbing three-hundred-pound balls a mile and a half with great accuracy. We will need your help to obtain rope, a block and tackle, and horses. We need men to pull these cannons into position to defend the Indians from slavers. I wish to capture the pirate ship to replace the one that I lost. Those guns in proper hands would prevent the outlaw ships from going up a navigable stream and hiding from us."

The captain rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Sergeant Becker," he said, "after you have escorted Senor Scott to the senora's home, you will take a detail and assist in preparing and placing the cannon."

He turned back to Scott. "The blacksmith, Abraham, has volunteered his help. You should also know that a chest belonging to Dominick Plehve has been recovered and is held by the banker, Tomas Gomez. It may contain incriminating evidence against many—especially Dom Plehve."

The captain-general watched his men as they moved onto the trail with full packs and weapons. He looked up the jagged path, shook his head, and then followed. This would be a tough journey.

Scott's party started out of the jungle. The old priest was on one litter and another had been fashioned to carry Roseanna. Her leg had swollen and her hands and face were covered with welts from mosquitos. Moses insisted on carrying the front of the litter and his soldiers took turns with the rear. Tibela walked beside Scott.

By late afternoon, the trees had thinned. As they came around a bend, they saw Tibela's home. There were no shouts of joy or laughter for they had come back defeated. Her little son was still captive and Scott understood her tears as she neared home.

Blue hung around the wharf as cargo was loaded. His practiced eye could see that the ship was near the full mark and a few casual inquiries gave him all the information he needed. Now for a dram of rum, he thought, turning his steps toward the saloon. Two soldiers stood casually at the entrance but they did not appear to be on duty. He watched them for a few minutes and finally became suspicious. It was possible that they were lookouts and it was best not to take a chance. He would go to the stables first, get the chest, and then come back for his drink.

He jingled the coins in his pocket. The captain had advised him to take a carriage to easily carry the chest. He toyed with the idea of opening it to see what was there. Such chests usually held gold, silver, and jewels—the idea was irresistible! A coachman stopped beside him on the street and he reached to open the door.

The driver held up a restraining hand. "Here, now, I run no free service. My companion was killed a few days ago and he

was carrying a seaman. I'm not saying you're one of them, but on the other hand, I want to see the color of your money first."

Blue was furious. A scroungy half-caste talking to him this way! But he had work to do and he needed the coach.

"Hold now, amigo," he said, taking the coins from his pocket. "Here's the money in advance. I must ride to the stables outside town. May be that you know him, my friend Berko." He smiled into the man's face.

"I'll take my dinero now for both ways and it will cost you more if there is any delay." He reached to take many coins, more, Blue knew, than was customary.

Blue did not protest as he climbed into the coach. "I want to surprise my friend, so stop down the road apiece and I'll step behind the barn." He threw his head back and chuckled throatily. "Yes, old Berko is sure going to be surprised."

As they rode along, he frequently stuck his head out of the coach. There must be no mistakes for much was at stake. He had the ring and if Berko were alone and gave no trouble, all would go well. However, he must be careful. He wanted to look things over before making an appearance. Perhaps he should have waited another hour. It would be totally dark by then and he could work better unseen.

The carriage stopped and the driver leaned over and yelled, "It's just around the bend."

Blue stepped out. The driver spit to the far side of the carriage, then asked, "How soon do you want me to pick you up?"

Blue had started to walk away and said over his shoulder, "Give me fifteen minutes, no longer." He placed a hand on his knife, then disappeared into the sparse brush. Insects stirred, causing him to curse.

No one was in sight. He circled around to the back, then stepped over a wood fence and opened a door that let him into the nearly dark barn.

He walked carefully toward the front of the building and heard the horses crunching their feed. There was a strong smell of horse dung, hay, harness, all of it foreign to him. He felt uncomfortable and out of his element, wishing that he were aboard ship.

Berko must be here, he thought. He saw many horses, but where was the stableman? He quietly made his way toward the front, looked into the tack room, then crossed a wide alleyway to the opposite side and entered Berko's small office. It was empty and Blue stepped outside, and saw the coach drawn up nearby. Two men were talking to the driver and they looked like soldiers. "Damn that man!" he muttered. He'd better move out of sight for awhile. There were plenty of places to hide. He might even have to return to the ship, though he hated the thought of facing the captain without the chest.

He was sliding along the wall toward the rear of the barn when he saw a giant of a man silhouetted against the evening sky. Blue was sure he hadn't been seen yet. But, he'd best hide in one of the box stalls until the fellow had gone on by. He quickly slipped a bolt back, and entered a stall. The sound alerted the horse and it swung around, startled, its nostrils flaring.

Christ! The noise would alert the man outside. Blue knew nothing about horses and had no interest in them. The only ones he had ever come into contact with were docile carriage beasts.

Blue had unfortunately chosen a stallion's stall, and the big animal rushed the door and put its weight against it to see if it was open. Blue dodged just in time to keep from getting crushed and now he was boxed in a corner.

The big animal was angry and he could smell fear. He had been disturbed while eating. Without the usual halter over his head and ears, the human smell confused him. He snorted again at the man crouched in the corner. His eyes were wide and he somehow felt danger in the stranger.

The stallion whirled around in the small space. As he passed the man, the animal felt a sharp burning pain where a knife slashed across his shoulder.

Blue had seen the massive blacksmith, Abraham. Two men from the garrison were with him. They had watched quietly as the pirate made his way inside the barn. With Berko's information, he was expected. The stableman had told the authorities that Dominick Plehve or someone wearing his ring would pick up the chest. Now they decided to investigate.

When Abraham watched Blue creep into the stallion's box he ran to warn him. He heard the big horse's enraged neighing, followed immediately by tremendous blows against the sides of the stall. A terrified scream was cut short by another hammer blow against the wooden wall.

Berko and the soldiers ran inside. As they opened the door, the stud cringed nervously away from the bloody bundle on the floor.

Berko tried quietly to calm the big horse as he carefully entered. Abraham stood just inside the door and then reached out slowly and rubbed the soft quivering muzzle, guiding a halter over the horse's nose. Berko began to walk out with the animal when the stallion again caught the smell of fresh blood. He stampeded into the alleyway, dragging Berko with him at the end of the halter rope. The stableman fought to hold on and at last got him under control. Both horse and man were wet with sweat.

"We'll never get this animal back in that stall tonight," Berko gasped breathlessly. "Is the man dead?"

"Yes," Abraham replied. "We'll hitch a team to the wagon and take him into the Casa das Mortes."

As they carried Blue from the stall, one of the soldiers exclaimed, "My God, I believe every bone in his body is broken, and his face—" His voice died out.

"Abraham," called Berko, "Put the gray mare in the corral in the back and then I can put this stud in that stall."

Abraham got a halter and gently led the mare past the squealing stud to the small corral in the rear. She flattened her ears as she passed by, ready to kick if he got close. At last Abraham shut the gate and turned to help Berko with the stud. They finally coaxed him into her box and triumphantly slammed the door. The stallion trumpeted a few times, but at last went back to his grain and hay.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Scott was the last to enter the warehouse. The Jewish men were already gathered. Jacob ben Joseph saw him and came with outstretched hand. "Scott Bolinski, you are almost as big as your farther, Kurtsev. I knew your father, and your grandfather as well, and now you. Three generations of Bolinskis, all warriors, yet men of peace. I owe my life to your family, as do most of us in the Jewish settlement."

Scott looked into the friendly, intelligent eyes and felt a kinship with this man. Moses joined them and Jacob held up his hand to include everyone. "Gentlemen, come close and meet the son of Kurtsev Bolinski. Some of you already know him. I think you are all acquainted with Sergeant Moses Becker."

With his arm across Scott's shoulder, he continued. "You must meet all of our people, my boy. This is Tomas Gomez and here is Abraham." He reached to include Jens in his introduction.

Jacob now called for everyone's attention. "Gentlemen, please take seats for we have business to discuss. We have important matters before us."

Scott rose to his feet. "I am not a public speaker," he said,

"but I have some stories to tell. Firstly, my mate aboard the *Nina Marie* was William, son of Menasseh ben Yakov." There were surprised exclamations from the men. Many had known William's father. "He was taken as a slave with Chief Lamoni's people. It is my hope that he is still alive. He gave himself up in order to save my life." Secondly, Abraham has told me of the death of Captain Gann's seaman. I cannot say I am sorry. At this very moment, the captain-general has set a trap on the river for Dominick Plehve and the cannibals. We are hoping to capture them and free the natives they have taken. Our men are supplied with flintlock muskets. These guns have enclosed locks so the rain and dampness will not affect the powder.

"Dominick Plehve plans to take slaves into the cove north of Marajo Island where our friend, banker Tomas Gomez, is to meet him with gold. He has given us useful information. We will set a trap there for Plehve, in case he eludes the captain-general. We will set our defenses well. This fort, if you will, will not only protect us now, but in the future will be a bastion against slave traders and pirates. That is our immediate project." Scott felt a thrill in outlining a course of action.

Tomas Gomez, indicated that he had something to say. "Shall I meet with Dominick Plehve as he wishes?"

"No," Scott said firmly. "The pirates would take you aboard their ship since they expect you to be carrying gold. No, it is better that you chance the threat that Dominick made against you than to meet your fate on board a pirate ship."

Scott looked around him. "I thank you all in advance for the help that you have committed to this joint enterprise. Are there any further questions?" He paused. "Then, that is all I have to say."

Scott approached the banker. "Senor," he said, "The Senora di Almagro is suffering from the loss of her son. She does not know whether she will ever see him again. The trip from which she has just returned was very difficult for her and she is bone weary. Yet she cannot sleep. Would you and your esposa kindly call on her? I would be most appreciative."

Tomas' eyebrow raised slightly. It seemed that young Scott had special interest in Tibela di Almagro. Did he realize she was still married? Perhaps to a dead man, but this had not been fully determined.

"Certainly. We are old friends. We will invite her to stay with us for awhile, until this deplorable business is cleared up."

Sergeant Moses Becker drew Jacob ben Joseph aside. "Doctor," asked Moses, "how is Roseanna?"

"I am quite satisfied with her progress," replied ben Joseph. "She will require about three weeks to recover from her infection and fever. She is staying in my home. My wife is an excellent nurse and the girl is well looked after."

"I will be gone for awhile," Moses said. "Kindly tell her of my concern and that I will visit her upon my return. She has been through a terrible ordeal and life has been cruel to her." Moses grasped Jacob's hand. "Thank you for looking after her."

The doctor watched thoughtfully as they left. Roseanna, he thought, a byword among gossipers as the follower of the old priest—and a Catholic too. Hmm—I wonder how this can come out. Surely Moses knows these things. Certainly he's not some young schoolboy running a fever over a pretty face.

And little Feijao, the doctor thought, another operation today on his legs. What a brave boy. Perhaps Roseanna could help him learn to speak. It would occupy her hours.

Scott walked Abraham to his smithy shop where several men were working at the forges. There were barrel forges, a lock shop, benches for filing and gunshot making, a brass foundry for mountings, a mill for grinding and polishing, and a forge for fittings. In another room, men were assembling guns.

Abraham directed them toward his own quarters and showed them rows of finished weapons. "Armas de fogo," he said with pleasure. "I am also manufacturing powder. There always seems to be a shortage." He pointed to Sergeant Becker. "The military are using my guns and powder now. I found a better method of straining powder which produces hard little grains. It is much easier to handle and leaves less residue in the barrel after firing."

"I'm anxious to try this powder of yours in my long guns," said Jens vehemently, "aiming the iron ball right for the pirate, Gann. I'll not forget what a butcher he is."

Scott took one of the weapons from a case. It was beautifully finished with stock fashioned from hard Brazilian wood.

Abraham glowed with pride and rubbed his hand over it. "There is none better," he said proudly.

Jens grabbed it, raised it to his shoulder, and sighted through the window. "Careful, Jens," laughed Scott. "Just because you've been around a few cannons doesn't mean you know anything about a musket."

Jens looked at him with hurt pride. "Scotty, lad, I've used many a shoulder firearm and I've powder scars to prove it. Our friend here has patterned this fine weapon after the British brown bess, the flintlock musket, I'd guess."

"You're right, Senor Jens," replied Abraham, who turned to Sergeant Becker. "Senor, I will supply guns to all the soldiers. Take this one for your own use, and Senor Scott, you pick one for yourself. They have all been test fired and are ready for use."

Sergeant Becker was pleased. "Abraham's guns are the very best. I have one like this, Scott. Here, try it for balance."

As Scott raised it to his shoulder, Sampson's words came to his ears. "Hold your elbow up, move your hand forward a little and balance the gun—squeeze, never jerk."

"They are beautiful firearms, Abraham," Scott said. "Jens and I will settle our accounts at a later time. Our funds are temporarily low."

Abraham raised his hands over his head in protest. "Never, never would I accept payment from a Bolinski. Take the guns with you. We can take a few practice shots on the way. I will get some powder and bullets."

Scott led them into the brilliant sunlight, shadowing his eyes as he looked across the courtyard where Abraham's men were harnessing horses. As he walked toward them, he noticed that the wagons were loaded with their gear. Great coils of heavy rope, tools, blocks and tackle, and food supplies were being carried from the warehouse.

Sergeant Becker turned toward soldiers standing at ease beside their saddled horses. Jens came from the dark entry of the warehouse, followed by a huge man carrying supplies for the cannons.

Abraham pointed toward the street. A beautiful carriage pulled by two pairs of matched blacks drove down the

cobblestoned street and stopped near Sergeant Becker and his men.

"Looks like trouble, Scott. That's the governor's coach," Abraham said quietly as the driver held the restive horses and a footman jumped lightly to the ground and opened the ornate door. A portly man stood for a moment in the doorway, velvet hat in hand. Then he stepped down and put on his hat with a flourish, knowing all eyes were on him.

"Yes, that is the Honorable Lucio di Cavalcante. I will stay out of his way. He suspects me of practicing Judaism—which I do, of course. If he could prove his case, I'd be on my way to the Portuguese Inquisition and he would take over my business." He gave Scott a look of wry amusement. "So we are all New Christians now."

"Where is Captain-General, Manuel de Souza?" the governor thundered. He was a large man with heavy eyebrows and black eyes.

"Sir, he is seeking Judge Dominick Plehve, who is under the king's arrest."

"I know all about the king's warrant and the carelessness of the military in letting him escape. How many soldiers are with de Souza?"

"Thirty, your honor."

"Thirty soldiers are needed to capture one man?" The governor was losing his temper.

"Dominick Plehve has joined with the cannibals. The sergeant was sweating, even though they were in the shade of a large acacia tree and a cool ocean breeze was swaying the treetops. The governor looked at their travel preparations.

"And where are *you* going, Sergeant Becker?"

"The captain-general gave me orders to accompany Senor Alexander Bolinski. We intend to set up fortifications to protect the Indians from illicit slave traders."

The governor swung his full attention to Scott, looking deliberately down at his wooden leg. "A Russian name, a Dutch ship, and a Jewish face!" He shook his head. "My grandfather helped lead the revolt that swept the Dutch from this land. We don't want them back. And Jews are not welcome here." He stared coldly into Scott's eyes.

"Now, sergeant," he continued, "half of our military strength has left this city to go on a wild goose chase and you are proposing to further weaken our position by also departing." He pointed his cane at the waiting soldiers. "And you're taking these men with you? Eight pirate leaders were recently hung in the Indies, but there are many more on the high seas. I don't propose leaving our city unprotected."

"But sir, the fortification we plan to set up would prevent the villains from coming into the north harbor."

"No pirate with any sense would attempt to attack our city from that quarter. We have sugar, and hides and Indians to sell. Occasionally a thief may get by us and steal a little. This is the land of the Portuguese. The blacks are for work, the Indians are for sale and," he looked at Scott, "the Jews can find other lands. Portuguese blood tamed this country and now they come to pick up the profits of trade and industry."

Scott was struck speechless by this bigotry.

"No, sergeant," the governor added, "you are not going anywhere except back to the garrison. Put your men on around-the-clock sentry duty." He fingered the crucifix that hung from a gold chain about his neck. "This is the land of the cross and we will not tolerate any interference with our Church Catholic here." He stepped heavily back into the carriage.

Scott looked at Moses in disbelief. Then Abraham cut in, "Well," he said, "you had quite a lecture, from what I could see. What's the outcome?"

"I'll not be able to leave the city," said Moses. "The captain has always dealt with him. This is a first for me, and, after this experience, I hope it's my last."

"I've traveled to most parts of the world," Scott said. "But I have never been given a tongue-lashing like that. Well, it doesn't change our plans. We just won't have the soldiers along."

Jens was dismayed. "You mean we travel out into the damn jungle again with no guards?"

"I'll take a few of my black boys," Abraham interjected. "I've trained them to use my guns, though the governor would throw me in jail if he found out."

Jens was not satisfied. "I sure wish I was back at sea. I'd

never set foot on land again." The men laughed and their mood changed.

"The trip will be on good roads except for the last mile or two. By then, Chief Lamoni will be there with his warriors to take you through the worst part. I wish I could go along," said Moses regretfully.

Scott led the way on horseback. Abraham sat on the wagon and drove the team and Jens drove a second vehicle with the priest seated on the canvas covering the tools and ropes.

The padre was comfortable and relaxed. "My son," he said, "I will be with you to drive evil from your path."

Scott could see Jens mumbling. He dropped back to see what was troubling him. "You look like you'd swallowed bilge water. What's your problem?"

"Good God, Scott! I did as you asked and nursemaided the old man all the way down the trail. Now how come I'm stuck again?"

"You want him to find another woman to carry him?" asked Scott, laughing. He says he has to visit Lamoni and his heathens and that's where we're going. It will only be for a little while."

"I'm going to get stuck with him again. I'll tell you this, once we get to working over the cannon, I'll have no time for anything else. You remember that now. Your father never humiliated me like you do." Jens slapped his reins down on the rumps of the horses. He sighed as he saw a flight of pelicans heading out to sea.

Clouds were gathering as the group went south along the Tocantins River. A short distance out of the city, they passed suburban plantations—the mansions of the rich. Sugarcane, hides, and gold had made a few men wealthy. All their houses were completely enclosed by masonry walls, topped with glass shards. Stout decorative pillars supported the ornamental iron gates. There were coach houses, stables, slave quarters, and chicken houses. Outside the walls were shanties where the servants lived. Those close to the river had small bathhouses. The men in the caravan envied the white children who were attended by their slaves. They were to be seen swimming and playing in the river's waters.

Jens glanced back at the priest and grumbled to Scott. "I could do with a bath." He looked at his hands. "They're still sore and blistered. I've put up with thorns, snakes, poison ants, and storms, but one thing I'll have no truck with is vermin."

"My son," the priest called out, "Remember, the words of St. Francis of Assisi, of blessed memory, wherein he speaks of lice as the pearls of poverty. They will keep you humble."

Sourly, Jens felt he could be both clean and humble. Besides, he was no stranger to poverty. He touched his new gun, secure in a leather boot, and felt the pride of ownership. I suppose that is sinful, too, he thought.

They passed a short distance from Tibela's home and Scott rode back. "Yes, I know. You will keep on this road until the time comes to ford the river and then start north. From the Senora's plantation, I can swim my horse across the water and meet you. I'll have more than an hour."

Tibela was on the veranda steps awaiting him as he jumped from the saddle onto his good leg. He hurried up to take her hands. His heart lifted as he put her fingers to his lips. Then he realized that her eagerness was not for him alone.

"No, Tibela, no news yet from the captain-general. I am sorry."

She studied him intently. "I know. You have risked your life to find him. I've sent Julio and Silva to bring me word from Captain de Souza. They will return when they have something to tell me."

Scott fondled her fingers as he told her of all that he had done since leaving, and of the governor's edict.

"Lucio di Cavalcante has been to my home," she said. "He is strong-willed and, as my father used to say, 'bull-headed.' There has been tragedy in his life and his health has not been good," Tibela said softly.

Scott looked tenderly at her, loving her gentleness and understanding of even the pompous bureaucrat.

"I have a question for you, Tibela."

"What?"

He lifted her chin with his finger. "Have you ever known hate?"

Her eyes met his. "Hate is such an ugly word when used

against people. Yes, Scott, I hate evil, pain and fighting. People sometimes do evil things or cause pain, but it is to God to judge them."

"But fighting—sometimes that is necessary," he said.

She looked at Scott with an unspoken question. Then she whispered, "Why?"

"Some things cannot be left to God. There are times when we must smash—a man or a problem. If I can, I will kill the pirate, Gann. Not only is he responsible for the loss of my leg and the death of my men, but I have to stop him from further evil. The cannibals also must be stopped defeated. I judge men by what they do, Tibela, and I cannot wait for God."

Tibela sighed. "I suppose a man has to look at things differently. Will there never be an end? Why can there not be love and peace?"

"Someday I hope all men and women will live and love like you, Tibela, with understanding. Until then, only blood and iron will bring it about. I will do everything in my power to bring you a world of safety and peace and love. But now, my dear, I must leave."

She walked down the steps with him and, after he had mounted, she stood by his horse. "Vaya con dios, Scott. Off with you!" Her eyes were full of tears.

He wanted to leap off his horse and hold her tightly in his arms. But she was still another man's wife. He had yet to solve that problem. He raised his hand in farewell, turned his horse, and galloped down to the river. There, he urged his horse to swim across, hanging onto its side until they started up the opposite shore. Then he got back into the saddle. The water felt good on his body. Even though the sky was partly clouded, it was warm.

He saw the others a short distance up the road and soon caught up with them.

Jens called, "Some as has all the fun and then some as does all the work."

"Seems like I remember you having a chance for a free wedding and you wormed out of it." Scott laughed and rode up beside Abraham. They had been on the road about four hours when the black men unhitched the teams and led them to water.

"These are freed slaves," said Abraham. "Over a hundred years ago, many blacks fled the plantations with weapons and tools. They went to the interior and set up a republic. Many joined but it was finally destroyed by a dictator. Some then went to work in the mines and earned their freedom. These men have their own brotherhood."

Abraham spoke very softly. "Watch them." He then shouted loudly, "Inimigro!" Four blacks dove at the side rack on the wagon. Each had a gun primed and within seconds were ready for action. Abraham took four smooth stones as large as his hands from the river's edge. "Uno," he called out. The first man fired and the rock burst into fragments. "Dos." He tossed a second stone into the air and a loud boom sounded as the rock was hit. "Tres," he called, and the marksman hit the rock. "Cuarto." Again Scott was amazed.

Jens watched the reloading. As soon as the first man shot, he poured the loose black explosive from a powder horn into the barrel and, using a ramrod, jammed it to the bottom. Jens nodded his head in approval. The stuff was not hard enough to form lumps that would burn slowly instead of exploding, so a ball and wad were forced on top. Fine powder was poured into the primary pan on the outside of the barrel. It was now ready for use. Each man had loaded as the others shot and were ready to fire again if necessary. A great white cloud of smoke nearly hid the marksmen from view.

The voice of the priest could be heard above all other sounds. "The Lord has come," he shouted. "The Lord has come."

Jens, on his way to calm the padre, praised the men. "Well done, lads, well done. I've never seen better." The young men flashed their white teeth in smiles.

Abraham suggested that Scott and Jens try their new weapons. A target was set up and each man had a practice shot at it. Jens was a heavy artillery expert and did well, but Scott had more experience. He and Sampson had hunted game in most countries of the world, wherever Dutch ships traded. Scott had just primed his gun when a flock of ducks flew by. He picked off the leader and the men whooped with laughter when the bird plummeted to the ground. One of the boys ran to fetch it.

"Duck for dinner, Scott," called out Abraham. "That was an excellent hit."

Jens told the priest that our blessed Lord had not come, it was only the noise of firearms.

The caravan had been on the trail for many hours when several Indian warriors from Chief Lamoni's tribe rode up. For a few minutes they walked alongside the slow-moving wagons. Then suddenly, like birds, they rode swiftly away.

"The Lamoni tribes are poor, without firearms or ammunition. Except for their work with Senora Tibela, they would be destitute. They are a hunted people. Slave traders and cannibals have depleted their young men and women," Scott told the others.

"It has always been so," said Abraham sadly. "As Jews, we can have great sympathy, for we too are often pursued."

"But Abraham, they are rich in their horses. Their herds are the finest in the land—beautiful beasts, strong, rugged, and well-trained. They keep them in a valley not far from here and do not ride where others will see. Those that the boys rode are not of that special breed. You should see them."

Abraham showed interest. "I would like that, Scott. I have a great love for horses."

"You will, if the chief agrees."

They pulled into the Indian camp at dusk. Hunters were bringing in game from deep in the forest and along the river. The lookouts kept a sharp eye for enemies. Scott could see that while everyone was doing necessary tasks, there was time for childish tricks and pranks, sly flirtations, and displays of horsemanship. The boys wheeled their horses so close to the working girls that the females fled in pretended terror. The girls watched for opportunities to slip halters from tied horses and then laughed as the boys ran angrily after them.

Gayest of all was a young woman, straight and strong. Her black hair hung loosely about her shoulders and she had the delicate contours of budding maturity. Her black eyes flashed innocent defiance at Scott. She laughed as she worked and she tossed her dark head with careless coquetry, setting her earrings to jingle.

"Careful there, lad," said Jens, who was working on the supplies alongside Scott. "Don't let those shapely bare legs

take your mind off our work." Jens gave a low whistle. "She's got her eye on you, bucko."

"She is one of the captives that the old chief and I rescued from Puka's men. She's just grateful."

"That's only right. One of those cannibals would have her sharing his shanty." Jens paused in his work to raise his head and sniff the air. "What's that I smell cooking, Scott? Sure smells good, like roasted venison. Lots better than boiled monkey, especially with the hair on."

Suddenly one of the Indian lookout boys came racing into camp. "Cannibal, cannibal!" he shouted.

Scott wondered for a second if this could be a prank, but a sudden chill went through the peaceful camp. Women silently grabbed their babies and ran with the children who darted like little shadows through the dust. As though looking to Scott for protection, they ran to the vehicles. Abraham called to his blacks.

As the frightened people came toward him, Scott bunched them all together between the two wagons. The boys wheeled their horses behind the group of old people, children, crying babies, and mothers. The young Indians, armed with bows and arrows, were excellent shots. The blacks, Scott, Jens, and Abraham rested their loaded guns on the sideboards of the wagons.

Suddenly the cannibals came screaming out of the thick forest. They waved long spears and carried machetes and knives. The sun had lowered and deep shadows were creeping over the camp. It took but a second for the savages to see the two wagons and the frightened people hiding between them. The leader raised his spear over his head and gave a scream of challenge and victory. It was his last, for Abraham called out, "Uno, dos, tres, cuatro." Every bullet counted and the guns fired and were quickly reloaded. The blacksmith called again to the black men. Terrified Indian ponies plunged around the wagons and white smoke drifted toward the attackers. Swift arrows found their marks and the cannibals, who had been confident of easy victory, were stunned. As bullets and well-aimed arrows decimated their ranks, they turned and fled. Several Indian lookouts followed the invaders out of the camp.

Abraham had his men load the dead onto a wagon. "Look

at those murdering devils," he said. "Bones sticking through their noses, heads shaved, and paint smeared all over their bodies." He stood out of the way as the big blacks picked the corpses up like sacks of grain and tossed them carelessly onto the wagon. "God Almighty!"

The Indian lookouts returned grinning. "Senor Scott, the cannibals are still running. We found two more wounded." The boy drew a thumb across his throat, as he looked admiringly at the red-haired giant who had defended them so well. "None of us were injured, Senor Scott. All they did was leave a few of their spear throwing sticks."

"Here comes the girl with the shapely legs, Scott," Jens laughed. "She and some of her friends are bringing our dinner. The lad by her side looks like she's already spoken for."

"Thank you, Senor Scott," the boy said. The pretty girl lowered her eyes as she handed him a bowl of food."

Jens rolled his eyes and swallowed hard and Abraham laughed. "No, it isn't monkey. It's venison. A good eater can get used to monkey, though. The taste is a bit too lively for me."

"I hope I never have to eat it again." Jens spoke fervently. "But I could eat a lot of this. Mmmm, venison and roasted bananas."

Scott turned to Abraham. Things would have been a lot different if you and your men had not been along. Lucky for us you were here."

"This tribe needs help," Abraham answered quietly. "Come daylight, we'll get at it."

Guards were posted and fires allowed to die down. Distant thunder sounded over the rain forest. Scott wondered how the captain-general and his men were faring.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Scott was riding the powerful stallion. He felt the animal's sound muscles between his legs and knew it had good staying power. Since it trampled the pirate, the stallion had gained notoriety as a killer. But, Scott reasoned, the horse was not to blame. As they galloped along the road toward the city, his thoughts went again to Tibela. Impatiently, he shrugged his shoulders.

He reached Jacob ben Joseph's home and Moses greeted him. "I guessed you'd be here," said Scott. They both laughed as Moses led the way to a small dining room.

"Tell us your news," the doctor requested.

Scott gave a brief account and then said, "Now I must leave so I can be up early tomorrow. I feel Dominick will make his move then for he knows that Captain Gann will not wait beyond the date that was set."

There was silence. They all knew the danger he would face.

"Scott," said Moses, "I have something for you." He went down the hall and into a library, removing a sword from a cupboard.

Scott recognized it immediately and took it gently into his

hands. "I thought it was lost." He read the Hebrew inscription. "How did you ever get it?"

"It was in Senor Plehve's closet. I saw it when I freed the captain-general. This was my father's sword, Scott. Where have you seen it before?" Both men sobered. The sword seemed to bridge a gap of family history. It was a family heirloom and part of tradition.

"My mother, Esther, put it in my care when I left Amsterdam. She got it from my father who wrestled it from the Count Dolgorsky the night my mother fought for her life. "But Moses, if it was *your* father's sword and he was my mother's father . . . Then you are my uncle! And your name Becker was originally ben Adhem."

Moses smiled. "My sister gave it to you. Captain Gann captured it and gave it to Plehve and I got it from him. Now, Scott, I give it back to you. Esther, my sister, your mother, would like that." His hand gripped his nephew's shoulder.

Scott took the weapon into his hand. The balance was perfect—it was made for battle! "Moses, I'll take it on this trip. But the sword is then yours, by right of birth!"

"My father died with none of his sons by his side. However, Scott, take it now, and may it bring you back safely." The two men gripped hands. Scott tied the sword and sheath to his belt. He bid farewell to his hosts and walked proudly to his horse. He had the new gun in a saddle boot and a sword as well as a knife on his belt. He felt whole again.

It was nearly dark when Scott reached the waterfall. Storm clouds thundered overhead making the horses skittish. He unloaded all his gear and released the animals.

In the course of the next hour he climbed rocks made slippery by spray from nearby water. He had his weapons and a sixty-pound pack on his back. With little daylight left, he found a straight tree and reamed holes into its trunk. Then he drove sharply pointed pegs into the holes to make steps. He uncoiled a rope and tossed it over the lowest limb. With his sword point, he knocked a bird-eating spider loose from its nest. It was as big as a dinner plate and had eight eyes. He killed it and tossed it from the trail.

He then took the loose end of the rope and tied his pack to it,

then fastening the long end to an adjoining tree trunk. By using the pegs for his good leg and pulling himself up with the rope, he was soon perched high in the huge tree where he would be safe for the night, his weapons next to him. He felt secure.

As he lay stretched out in the crotch of a limb, with his legs propped before him, his senses were keenly alert. The sounds of rushing water drowned all the jungle noises. He looked up as a straight bolt of lightning, peculiar to this land, gave an instant of brightness. Then the jungle plunged into darkness again.

But sleep was impossible. His thoughts turned backward. How long had it been since the fatal roar of a cannon and the whistling shell that tore his leg from his body and sunk the ship? Three months? Four? He had lost track of time as he'd lay delirious in the shanty of Lamoni's village.

What about his father and mother? Scott had been to the company offices many times with his father and he knew that his ship, the *Nina Marie*, would be posted as missing. What they couldn't know was that he was alive and that William—was a slave.

His thoughts were interrupted by a scratching at the base of the tree. He strained to identify the noise as he peered down, trying to see through the blackness of the night. Lightning flashed again and he saw a cat that looked as big as a young horse. Scott's muscles quivered in readiness. He drew his sword from its sheath. Better this weapon than depending on a damp charge of powder and a misfire from his musket.

The cat pawed at the pegs driven into the tree trunk and, with the next flash of lightning, Scott could see that they had been worried out of their holes.

A second cat joined the first and they let out deep chesty growls as they played together. The second animal became more interested in the tree and the strange human odors that were floating down the tree trunk onto the ground. The cat rose on his hind legs and reached up to the lower limbs. Scott saw hard green eyes and ears flat against the skull. He braced himself, for he had a gut feeling that this feline was going to leap. If it did, the great paws with their razor-sharp claws would capture his victim and drag him to the ground.

The cat gave a high, blood-curdling scream. Then he leaped. With unerring accuracy, the big claws dug across Scott's leg.

At the same time, the sword point found the beast's shoulder and scraped bone. Scott's only injury was a torn pants leg. The cat had picked the wooden leg.

The animal fell to the ground and rolled about, screaming with frustration and pain. He limped away into the jungle with his mate following.

At earliest light, Scott pulled the plug on his musket and changed the charge. Then he lowered himself to the ground on a doubled rope. The rain had washed away all signs of blood, but he knew that he had cut deep into the muscle of the big cat.

Mist covered the trail and Scott took great care going over boulders and through tangled roots of mammoth mangrove trees. The sun's first rays showed on the tops of the trees and he knew that he was within shouting distance of the military encampment.

He was inching his way along when a voice spoke in his ear. "Senor Scott, it is Julio. Come, follow me." Scott's initial shock turned to relief and he moved confidently behind Tibela's caboclos. He passed a whole line of soldiers crouched on their packs, their muskets ready. Standing at the front of a makeshift shelter was the captain-general. He held out his hand in quiet greeting.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

"I came alone, captain. I felt that Dom Plehve would soon make his move and I wanted to be with you."

"I have many scouts. They will give us ample warning. He looked down at Scott's shredded trouser leg. "What happened? I see scratches on the wood. Were you attacked?"

"A cat climbed up my tree last night, but all he got was disappointment and a sharp jab in the ribs. It was lucky for me that he got my wooden leg.

They watched the mists roll up like billowing smoke. Suddenly they saw canoes moving toward shore. The captain quietly ordered his men to hold their fire until he gave the order. They edged closer to the river's edge, moving quietly. They didn't want the cannibals to become aware of imminent attack. Now they could see rafts carrying slaves. Scott counted at least a dozen. The canoes moved close to shore and now they could see the painted faces.

Suddenly the cannibal leader saw the soldiers. He froze in amazement. Then a shout of alarm went up. Still, they had to land, otherwise the current would carry them over the falls.

The captain-general acted swiftly, giving the signal to fire. There was bedlam. Some cannibals tried to reach shore by jumping into the water and swimming beyond range of the soldiers' guns. Others tried to row upstream and avoid the falls, but the current was swift and they became easy targets.

The leader decided to go back across the river, but that was a desperate hope. Each canoe, was headed directly toward soldiers and the savages, stooping low, rowed in perfect unison. The only targets for the soldiers were the men in the bows of the canoes, who became shields for the others, rowing with desperate strength.

The canoes hit the bank and with one fluid motion, the savages hurled spears at the enemy. They screamed and brandished their machetes.

Guns became useless for there was no time to prime and load. The fighting became hand-to-hand combat. Scott and the captain met the rush of screaming savages with drawn swords. Then Scott saw the officer fall with a spear in his shoulder. Scott's fighting blood was boiling and the swath of his sword seemed invincible. There was no tiredness in him now as his sword swung back and forth, back and forth.

Julio and Silva shot arrows into the group of screaming natives. Scott saw several fall to the ground. Finally, all was quiet. Some cannibals had escaped into the forest. Many had gone over the falls. Those on the ground were thrown into the current of the rio das mortes, the river of the dead.

Scott ran upstream to where the rafts that held captive natives had been towed ashore. His eyes searched for Tibela's son and Dominick Plehve.

"Over here, Senor," shouted the sharp-eyed Julio. "Come here, Roberto, boy."

A weary, dirty, wide-eyed little boy stared with unbelieving eyes as the two men ran toward him. With a sob, he fell into Julio's arms.

Satisfied that the boy was unharmed, Scott turned to the captain-general. He was unconscious. A long black spear with

painted symbols on it stuck grotesquely from his body. Scott searched his pack for strips of cloth and a bottle of ointment. He saturated the linen, then tied it to the blade end of the spear. He cleaned the spear with liquid from his bottle and then began the real work.

"Hold his shoulder, hard," Scott ordered a young soldier. Then he gripped the weapon and drew it back through the wound. There was a heavy gush of blood and Scott plugged the hole on both sides with cloth. He then bound the dressing in place.

Now he turned his attention to the wounded soldiers. Only seven of thirty could stand and, probably, only nine would survive. It had been a bitter battle and Dominick Plehve was nowhere to be found. He was either dead or still free. The trap had failed to snare its quarry.

Scott questioned everyone but no one knew what had happened to the judge before, during or after the battle. Neither had they seen Chief Puka.

Plans were made for Julio to take Roberto home to his mother, Tibela di Almagro. Scott would accompany them. Two soldiers also made up their group. They would later request wagons and horses be sent for the wounded. As they descended the rocky trail again, Scott felt it was a nightmarish repetition.

When they reached the trail's bottom, Julio began to set up camp. Suddenly a flash and a loud crash tore through the sky. The men hurried to prepare for another wet night. They built one-sided lean-tos where they could be out of the rain. Fires were lit to keep back the prowling jungle beasts. All the men had their muskets loaded. They agreed that a guard would stand watch as the others slept.

Scott was nervous. Though he was tired, he could not sleep. Roberto was also jittery. The roar of cascading water filled the air and thunder rolled across the distant sky. The patter of rain could barely be heard. Beyond a small fire, the jungle was pitch black. Suddenly a large cat screamed. It was too much for little Roberto and, with a gasp, he scrambled into Scott's lap for comfort. He felt the child's trembling and knew the boy was close to tears.

"How happy your mother will be to see you. She will be so

proud when I tell how brave you have been." He tried to coax a smile and then held Roberto close as he imagined the boy running into his mother's waiting arms. Scott's heart filled with joy. He was delighted that he would be the one to reunite mother and son. "Your mother will be so glad to see you." Scott spoke loudly enough to be heard above the noise of the falls.

"I don't want her," Roberto said. Scott stared at him. There was no mistaking what the boy had said.

"But she loves you." Scott moved the boy from his chest to his knee where he could more easily reason with him. It was the strain and terror, no doubt, that had brought him to this state of mind.

"No. She does not love me. She let the senor take me away." His eyes were swimming with tears.

"That man would have hurt you if she had not let him take you."

"But she didn't come and get me. She let him take me to the cannibals. They eat little boys. I saw them. He stared into the dark night, reliving the horrors of the last few days.

Suddenly he threw himself against Scott. He tried to control sobs, but they escaped his lips and soon he was crying so hard that his body shook. The big man rocked the child gently back and forth, crooning songs he had heard as a youngster. At last the weary boy sank into sleep.

Scott held the small warm body close. He understood the child's shock and resolved that never again would this little one and his mother go unprotected. They needed him. He grasped the boy possessively. His hand gently stroked dark silky hair away from the warm little face. The boy was his. Yes, with love, the boy was his, as was his mother. With a smile of contentment, he sank at last into sleep, the boy held close.

"It is time, senor," Julio spoke and Scott sat up. The guide had been reluctant to disturb the man and child, but the tops of the trees were already shining with the first rays of the sun.

Roberto opened his eyes and smiled as Scott helped him to his feet, then tossed him into the air several times as though exercising his bulging muscles. The boy laughed excitedly.

"Come, Roberto. I have cooked a fish and roasted you a

banana." Julio took him by the hand to a small fire. Its light cast a feeble glow on the still dark jungle.

Scott went to the stream, found a pond of clear water, and called to the child. "Come for a bath, Roberto. I will take one with you."

Julio helped the boy strip off his filthy clothes. Then they all plunged into the cool water, the boy screaming in ecstasy.

Roberto was fascinated with Scott's wooden leg. "It's a great weapon. I can use it to step on snakes, kick the enemy in the shins, or roast a rabbit over the fire." They all laughed as they splashed in the water. Then Julio washed the boy's clothes and wrapped him in Scott's shirt while his clothes dried near the fire.

As the first rays of sunlight shimmered across the water, they reached the trail. Roberto marched alongside the men. How quickly the young recuperate, Scott thought.

They left the tumbling waters of the river, and the sounds of the jungle could be plainly heard. Chattering spider monkeys stayed high in the trees. Curious birds of all colors and sizes flew close to see these strangers. Roberto was fascinated, pointing out the ones that interested him most.

Julio set a fast pace and Scott could see that the boy was tiring. He swooped him up. "I've got you, Roberto. You can sit on my shoulders like a bird." The boy was delighted and reached up to touch overhanging limbs as Scott watched carefully for snakes.

Julio signalled that soldiers were ahead, holding horses for them. Sergeant Moses Becker was the first to greet them. He ran forward and lifted Roberto from Scott's shoulders, noting the signs of weariness on Scott's face. He hugged the boy, then asked for details of the fight. Two soldiers were quickly sent to the garrison for horses, wagons, troops, and medical supplies for the wounded.

"I will go with my men to pick up the captain-general, and meet the column with the wounded. It's little satisfaction that so many of the cannibals were wounded since we lost some of our own men. And Dominick Plehve is still at large." Moses looked hopefully at Scott. "Is it possible that the man was killed?"

Roberto jerked at Scott's hand. "What is it, Roberto?"

"Senor Plehve is not dead," he stated. The men glanced at one another.

"Why do you say that, son?"

"Senor Plehve is sick in the belly. He did not come in the boats." Roberto's eyes were wide as he looked at the two men.

Scott rose to his feet and picked the boy up in his arms. "Then that explains it, Moses," he said. "No one knew where he was and everything happened so fast."

"Senor Moses, Senor Scott killed many cannibals with the sword," said Roberto.

Scott laughed softly. "Yes, son, this sword was something like an avenging angel." He pointed down at his leg. "It also saved me from making a meal for a jungle cat."

As the soldiers prepared to leave, Moses asked Scott to notify Doctor Jacob that the wounded soldiers and their captain-general would be needing immediate care.

"I will do that, Moses," he replied. "You see, Roberto is coming to the city to live with me." Scott winked. "He doesn't want to go home."

"Oh, I see. Well, after you two get settled in, perhaps you should both go to see his mother. In a week or so, maybe. I'll stop by the Senora's tomorrow. Is there any message, boy?"

Roberto didn't answer, so Scott said calmly. "Just tell her that her son is fine and that one of these days we'll come to visit."

Roberto cleared his throat. "Maybe I should go and tell her that I am all right?"

"Well, it's up to you. She may not let you out of her sight if you go back. There's that chance. But then you do need different clothes and it will be supertime soon. If you go, you'll have to stay for dinner." Scott turned to Moses. "What do you think? Is the boy making a wise decision? You see, he feels that his mother didn't look after him properly."

"Oh, so that's how it is. Well, he'll soon be a man and he should start making up his own mind."

Roberto's lip trembled. "Well, I've been thinking. Maybe she couldn't find me. *I* didn't even know where I was."

The two men could scarcely contain their laughter. Julio led up a horse and Scott mounted. Moses handed the boy to him as Julio stepped lightly onto his horse.

Moses looked up into the boy's eyes. "Roberto, you have made a man's decision. Your mother's arms ache for her son. Go with God, my boy."

They wheeled their horses and kicked them into a gallop. The few miles seemed endless as they raced to return a lost son to his mother.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Kurtsev had chosen to walk from his new home in Zaandam to his office in Amsterdam. He smiled as he recalled the surprised look of his coachman. Bolinski had an appetite for his work, exercise and a lust for life. He was a visionary man and though he had put down roots here in Holland, he still thought of his earlier home—Voronezh—the home of his boyhood. Someday he would go back.

Kurtsev walked with long strides and arms swinging freely, glad to be home. The sweet scent of spring air filled his lungs and his blood coursed warmly through his muscular body. His red hair was held in place by a velvet-brimmed hat, trimmed with gold braid. He wore a fashionable long coat with brass buttons. Its tails swung in the direction of the brisk sea breeze.

Windmills whirled at each turn of the road, singing as they revolved and white with lime dust. Their gaily painted roofs were covered with silvery thatch. The mills were busy with their humble task of sifting the fine sands which the peasants liked to spread on their floors, and stables.

Old Joast Vermeer rose from his tulip bed and lifted his hand in greeting.

"Good morning," Kurtsev called.

The old captain had returned several years ago, after sailing with the fleet of the Sea Wolves. Now he had his garden of hyacinths, narcissi, lilies, jonquils and tulips of all colors. Kurtsev knew of a tulip so valuable that one bulb was sufficient dowry for a daughter.

He had left Esther curled up in their luxurious bed with a mattress of down feather and quilts of fine Eastern silk. He had thought how beautiful she looked.

He recalled his friend, Peter, the czar of Russia, who had died five years ago. On Peter's last visit to Holland, they had gone together to visit the ruler's cottage in Zaandam. There he had lived as a young man, helping to build Dutch ships and later developing a navy for Russia. He had earned the title of "Peter the Great." Kurtsev smiled as he thought of the fun they had had when first they met in Moscow over twenty-five years ago.

Now as he proceeded toward his office, he drank in familiar sights. The traffic became heavy, but hardly a person passed without calling to him, and giving him a smile and wave. He passed huge warehouses crammed with exotic fruits, furs, rare woods, vegetable dyestuff, cocoa, silks, and Asiatic scents. Next to them were factories for refining camphor and cobalt blue. A hawker was sweeping his walks and crates of Chinese persimmons and fat prickly pineapples were waiting to be broken open and set on the shelves. Kurtsev stood a moment and observed the crows flying above the guard tower. It was used to look out over the plains for some threat from the sea. Scott and William, as boys, had earned money in their spare time from school as watchers in the tower.

As Kurtsev neared his office, he saw the familiar company crest hanging over the entrance. It was shaped like a shield with a large letter "D" in the top center. He faced a long day ahead. His desk would have a three month accumulation of reports from over four hundred outbound ships. Competition, mainly from England and Scotland, had cut into the company's profits, but Kurtsev still believed what had always been said, "Holland is a business house and Amsterdam manages the till with skill and profit."

A curious crowd gathered at the entrance as he approached. An elderly man with the look of a sailor, his face lined and worn and the color of an old boot, came forward. He beckoned Kurtsev, then shuffled forward, limping slightly. Gusts of beery breath hit Kurtsev's face as the man touched the bill of his cap with his forefinger in a seaman's salute.

"Sir," he said, "I sailed first as a ship's boy on the *De Zeven Provinciën*."

Kurtsev could see that he was trapped for the moment. The little man seldom had an audience, so Kurtsev expressed amazement and admiration at his distinction. The flagship was one of Holland's greatest.

The man continued. "Then I signed on as gunner's mate at fourteen florins per month. I sailed under many a shipper, but I remember the best master-gunner of all times, the Dane, Jens Anders."

Kurtsev's mind had been divided between listening to the old seaman and planning ahead for his work, but the name of the gunner brought him sharply to attention. "And your son, he was a mate to Captain Bogaart—a fine lad!" He pulled out an old rag from his pocket and blew his nose. "'Tis sad, but these things happen. I got this," he said, pointing to his game leg, "off the coast of the Sugar Islands, not far from where your lad was lost. It's a strange. . . ."

Kurtsev put a florin into the man's calloused hand and shouldered his way through the crowd into the office. He felt rising panic. The large room was crowded with stockholders, brokers, seamen, and merchants. As the tall red-haired man came into the room and marched with purposeful strides toward the bulletin board, a hush fell over the group. Every eye was upon him as he stopped and read a recent posting.

"April 5, 1734, *Nina Marie* wreckage sighted off the coast of Brazil. No known survivors. Report confirmed."

Everyone knew that Kurtsev's son, Scott, was aboard and that Hans Bogaart was the captain. Two other ships had been reported missing following the unusual storms in the Atlantic.

Terror raced through Kurtsev's mind and he forgot the anxious faces of the men, all friends, surrounding him.

He thought of Esther twenty-two years before, holding their

newborn baby boy, their first. How they had both laughed and played with him. She had forever cautioned Kurtsev to be careful, to not hurt the lad. How could he break the news to her? They had shared much pain and loss together, but surely, somehow, Scott had survived. This could not be—not *his* son—not Scott!

Some action must break this blinding pain, this loss. They must search for him. At last he was able to look into the sympathetic eyes of the men around him. All were familiar with his feelings. They, too, had all lost loved ones.

Kurtsev hurriedly left the office to meet Sampson. *How old he looks. But it has been over twenty-five years since I met him on the road to Kiev. What a great friend he has been.*

The big Greek walked beside Kurtsev, sharing his grief. "Kurtsev, I caught some conversation down at the docks about someone seeing a special sword with Hebrew engraving on its haft. It might be a clue."

Kurtsev swung around. His hands clasped Sampson's shoulder like a vise of steel. There was pleading in his eyes. "I'll go with you now. We must learn all we can, and quickly." His voice was urgent.

"The man is now at sea, but his ship is due here within a fortnight. We can only wait."

There was disappointment in Kurtsev's eyes but also a look of hope.

"It's possible the ship was indeed attacked, not lost at sea. Then there is a chance that Scott is alive. I must prepare to sail. He may need our help."

"The lad, if he's alive, will need no looking after, my friend. I'll vouch for that." The Greek smiled.

"What you say is true. The boy has strength and intelligence. But he's young, without our experience."

"You're a typical father. Everyone knows Scott is as capable as you are under *every* circumstance." Sampson reinforced his remarks by stabbing his broad finger against Kurtsev's chest. Then the two men started toward the home which they shared. Both were quiet and absorbed in their thoughts.

How quickly things change, thought Kurtsev. I had important appointments, a trip planned, and urgent meetings with

nobility to discuss trade routes. Now it all seems as nothing and only my son is important to me.

His daughters saw Kurtsev and Sampson coming up the lane and their shrill young voices called to their mother. Esther appeared at the doorway, removed her apron, and straightened her hair. Kurtsev saw the welcoming smile as she walked to meet her husband and their friend. He could also see a worried look cross her face. Why were they back so early?

Kurtsev was reminded of another bad time—when they had run for their lives from the fury of Count Dolgorsky. Now, years later, his wife raced to greet him with their two little girls. The children were breathless and clung to their father. Esther went up on her toes and brushed his cheeks with her lips, her eyes searching his. She felt a tremor of fear, a fear that had stayed close to the surface since the night her father was murdered and her home destroyed. She quickly gathered up the children and pushed them gently on their way back toward the house.

She stood quietly, facing Kurtsev. "It's about Scott?" she asked steadily.

Kurtsev marveled at the silent communication between them, as though love had opened their hearts and minds to each other. He pulled her down beside him onto the grass and then, taking her hands, told her what he had learned—of his hopes, and then his course of action. "I will sail as soon as I find out more of your father's sword. And our ship must be fitted for the voyage."

Esther looked at him with tear-blinded eyes and he squeezed her hands reassuringly. "It is doubtful that Scott is captive on a pirate ship." Both he and Esther knew that there were seldom survivors from a captured or sunken ship. "It is more likely that our son is on land. It is necessary that we begin an immediate search."

"I will go with you," said Esther. Kurtsev looked at her profile as she stared out over the channel. Her firm little chin was determined and he was sure she would go, even though it would be better if she would look after the children. Again she read his thoughts.

"Sampson will be here and we have an excellent staff.

Besides, Menasseh's wife, Anna will see that all is well. There are several from the village that have helped in the past and they will be grateful for the wage we will pay."

She faced him and tears ran down her cheeks. She went on her knees and threw herself into his arms. Her body was wracked with sobbing and he comforted her.

Kurtsev's own eyes burned with pain. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his face. Each of their children had been born from love—each wanted. The idea that Scott could be dead was too brutal for their minds to accept. Their effort must be to find and restore him to his rightful place at home.

Someday the boy would marry. That they could accept. But they could not lose him through death. They rose to their feet and, with arms around each other, went to break the news to the rest of the family.

As they walked toward their house, hand in hand, they saw their eldest daughter, Ruth. She ran toward them waving her slender arms. Her golden hair streamed behind her in the sunlight, glistening like spun gold. They stopped and Kurtsev felt Esther's hand grip his. He felt as though a cold hand clutched his heart. She was a girl filled with the joy of living and her love caused her beauty to blossom. Every dream was of William. With outstretched arms, she ran to her father and he lifted her off her feet and hugged her close, as though to comfort her.

Her laughter died. She felt a cold chill and released him. "It's about William," she cried. "What happened?"

"It's the ship. Wreckage has been found," her mother said. "Your father is leaving soon. He will find William and Scott."

Ruth fell to her knees in the grass, tears brimming. "No—no—no." Suddenly she began to weep hysterically.

Kurtsev picked her up in his arms and took her home. Her arms were about his neck, her head against his chest as he tried to comfort her. He felt her pain as though it was his own. He sat in his chair with his daughter on his lap.

Kurtsev finally carried the exhausted girl to her bed. Esther pulled up a coverlet and murmured words of comfort while, with dry eyes, her own heart broke at the loss of her son. She held the girl's face between her hands and looked long into her

eyes. "A Jewish woman does not weep, my child; she fights. We must give the strength of our faith and hope to our men. They have much work to do. But they will find our Scot and William. Of that I am certain."

Kurtsev told Sampson of his plans. "I would rather Esther stay at home, but she has every right to go."

The Greek warrior, still tall, with graying hair and dark, weather-beaten face, faced Kurtsev. "I, too, am coming," he said quietly. Kurtsev had fathered the boy, Sampson thought, but I taught him much.

Esther came into the room and held her hand out to Kurtsev. "We must tell Menasseh and Anna at once. They must not hear the news from strangers. Their son William is lost too."

Several days later, the preparations for the voyage were complete and Kurtsev and Menasseh stood at the door of the barn. There was a separate stall for each cow and the milkmaids were preparing them for milking. The sloping floor was covered with sawdust. A small curtained window looked over green meadows. The air smelled of the soaps used to scrub the wooden floor. The dairy was spotless.

"Perhaps we should return to the house," suggested Menasseh. The elder man's hair was now white and his face more deeply lined since the news of William. "My family is growing away from me," he spoke sadly. "Bernardo and Fernando have bought property in the new American Colonies. 'Don't worry, papa, we will be home often,' they said." Menasseh shook his head. "It's over a year now and still they are not here. Mama worries about them. They need Jewish girls for wives and they won't find them there."

Kurtsev patted his shoulder. "Your sons will make you and Anna proud. Don't worry. You have taught them well."

"Perhaps too well. The boys don't need us anymore. The girls are gone too. Delores and Theresa are both married and have children. I used to travel to see them, but Delores is in France now and Theresa in England. 'Papa,' they write, 'Why don't you and mama come see us and your grandchildren?' And now William is gone. He and I were very close. I wish I could go with you, Kurtsev, to find our boys."

The sun had left the land in darkness. A servant brought a lantern and hung it on a bracket by the door. Menasseh

continued, "Sergei is in Germany working as an engineer. He wants to build bridges and tall buildings. Marie is home tonight, but soon she leaves for a visit to Theresa. They both love music." The door opened and out came Yuri, the youngest, tall and broad like his father.

Kurtsev looked at the young man. "Can this be true? I hear you are a boatswain already?"

"Yes," said Menasseh. "The boy has worked hard to get his promotion. He likes sailing."

"I will make twenty-two florin each month." Yuri looked at his father closely. "And that is not much. Soon I can earn twenty-six."

"I am delighted that you will sail with me." Kurtsev took the boy's hand in his firm grip. "Now let us all go to your home for dinner."

The men walked into the house and took off their shoes before stepping onto the beautiful Chinese rug. Anna came and took Kurtsev's hands in her own. "Our friend, welcome!" she said.

The room was filled with the warm aroma of food. A roast goose was ready to carve and Menasseh was already stropping his carving knife as Anna put an apron around his waist.

"Good food and a happy life have given you a large waist." Kurtsev chuckled, enjoying the companionship of his friends. They were family, held by ties stronger than blood. He enjoyed their home—the racks of polished pewter spoons the primitive scales held by two iron-clasped hands, and the rows of blue crockery on the shelves.

Gifts from the nobility of the civilized world decorated the walls. A massive but delicately carved rosewood table with matching chairs had been a gift from the government of India in 1715. That year the Dutch East India Company was given trading rights there. Soon after, Menasseh studied the art of enameling and a teakwood cupboard held his treasured work.

At a quiet word from Menasseh, Kurtsev turned from his study of the room and joined the family. It was time for prayer and afterward, feasting. Large loaves of baked bread with huge mounds of fresh butter were set on the table. Ruth helped

Anna serve the soup. Menasseh ladled the clear consomme with vegetable, vermicelli, and tiny meatballs into bowls.

Yuri turned to Ruth. "How beautiful you look, little sister-to-be." She wore a wide dress with a silk apron. Her bodice sparkled with spangles and satin ribbons decorated the waist.

"Thank you, Yuri. I dressed specially, for tomorrow we leave to find my William."

Tea was served with the meal and Menasseh tapped his spoon against his cup, commenting, "Our greatest profits are from this herb, Kurtsev. And it will continue so for many years."

Ruth looked into her cup and said, "Some say fortunes can be told from the tea leaves that settle on the bottom."

People can see the future only through the eyes of God," said Anna.

"Dr. Tulp says tea is the cure for everything," Esther said, sipping some from her cup.

"Dr. Bontikoe recommends from fifty to two hundred cups a day to his patients. 'Tea is an excellent herb.' This is our advertisement in all countries. It has become so available that it is no longer just for the rich," Menasseh laughingly commented.

A single lantern hung in the rigging as Kurtsev and his passengers boarded the *Eagle* in the early hours of the morning. Kurtsev held Esther's elbow and Sampson gave his arm to Ruth, as servants carried their luggage. Yuri, Menasseh's boy and the crew were already aboard. A breeze blew strongly—and the ship rocked on her anchor.

It had been several years since Esther had taken a trip and she busied herself getting settled. In Amsterdam, her life had been filled with family. She had enjoyed her new home, but she had left some of her heart in their earliest cottage. It was there that her children had been born. Scotty was first and what joy he had brought to their lives. From the beginning, he had had the best features of her two men—father and her husband. He filled each day with happiness.

Kurtsev had been gone so much of the time that Scotty had

become the little man of the house. They had laughed together and, as he grew older, he had escorted his mother to social functions and the synagogue.

He had brought her flowers, especially the tulips that she loved. She rejoiced in his brilliance at school and helped him with recitations and languages. He had filled the hours of loneliness when Kurtsev was away.

She remembered her heavy heart at his departure. He had been so tall and strong. Oh, she admitted, Sampson had been a big part of the boy's life. The Greek warrior had helped him learn to walk, and played with him patiently. Finally Scott was able to best him in all the games of warfare.

Kurtsev had joined them whenever he could. The father delighted in wrestling, sword fighting, and games. Sampson had joked that one day his son would more than match his strength and skill. "That would please me," Kurtsev had said, "but I'll never make it easy for him. He must stretch to match me."

Esther went to Ruth's cabin and helped her unpack. She smiled fondly as she thought of her daughter's insistence on coming.

"Come, Ruth, the ship is moving from the harbor. It will be sunrise in a few minutes. That is a sight we must see." The women steadied themselves as they went up the steps to the main deck. Already the ship was under full sails. They climbed the steps to the quarterdeck, where Kurtsev stood beside the helmsman.

The sun cut below a distant cloud, its rays danced on the waves, and they braced themselves as the boat approached the sea. A roller burst against the ship's starboard bow as the 350 ton *Eagle*, with her 36 guns, rode gallantly and confidently on her way across the ocean.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Captain Eli Gann swallowed deeply, savoring the rum in his cup. When boarding the *Sweet Lilly*, he had passed the open hatch and his stomach churned from the stench of African slaves chained between decks. But he was here on business. Old Barnabas Whitt, the captain, was not happy with delays and was capable of expressing his displeasure with a frown so deep as to leave no doubt as to his toughness. He was frowning now.

"You want me to help you take the Portuguese ship, *Empresa*, from Ignacio Pinilla?" he growled. "It's like stealing a kill from a wildcat."

The pirate smiled. "But Barnabas, we would take her in port. The captain-general has been wounded and his soldiers care more for the pleasures of the city than for their guard duty. In the dark of the night, we'll cut her loose and the river will carry her out to sea before anyone can stop us. She will be fully loaded with cargo and ready to sail. I've had a man watching."

"Then this is the deal. You help me get enough Indian slaves to fill up my load and I help you take the *Empresa*?"

"Yes. There won't be any risk because you are licensed to carry slaves."

"This run isn't as good as it used to be," said Barnabas sourly. "We'll get hung if we stay at it much longer." He slopped his cup full again and raised it. The pirate did the same. "Well—agreed."

"Agreed," Gann replied. They rose and left the cabin to stand at the rail. Seagulls wheeled overhead and the low moaning sounds of the slaves came to their ears.

The men from the pirate ship were gambling with some from the *Sweet Lilly* crew. Men were cursing or laughing according to their wins. Gann pointed toward his vessel which lay in the shelter of Marajo Island. "I'll move in with the tide and you can follow. We'll be close to shore and can easily load on your slaves early in the morning. Then, at night, we can sail around the island to Belem and take the *Empresa*."

Barnabas frowned. "Your plan smells as bad as the slaves, but maybe I'm just getting old and suspicious. I need more slaves or I'll lose my contract. Otherwise I wouldn't listen to you. But there is one more thing. I want the Jew you are holding. His family is very rich and will pay a handsome ransom.

Captain Gann had already decided to get rid of William. This was the answer, especially if it made Barnabas think he was getting a good deal. With a mild show of reluctance, he finally said, "Agreed."

Barnabas put his hand on Gann's arm and squeezed it like a vise. "If anything goes wrong, I'll hold you responsible. And I have a long arm."

The pirate's anger flared, but he had important plans. "There'll be no problems," he said mildly. He hoped that Dominick Plehve was ready with his end of their bargain.

"Put your backs into it, lads," Gann ordered the longboat crew. "Let's show a little style. The boys of the *Sweet Lilly* are watching. It's time to get back to our own ship."

Scott rode briskly into the garrison courtyard, and strode quickly into the captain-general's office. He shook the proffered hand of the seated officer, who looked uncomfortable—

with a bandaged shoulder and his arm in a sling. Sergeant Moses Becker, Tomas Gomez, and Jacob ben Joseph sat around the desk in a circle and, with grave faces, they acknowledged Scott's friendly smile.

The captain-general pointed toward Moses. "The sergeant and his men brought in Dominick Plehve, Chief Puka and several natives last night. It was an arduous trip, but well planned and excellently executed." He turned to Scott. "I wish to express my personal gratitude to you for your help. The good doctor has credited you with saving my life."

Scott's mind was busy with thoughts of possible danger. Dom Plehve might well decide to make trouble. Yes, the man would fight for survival, perhaps by exposing the Jews.

The captain-general continued. "I am under the king's orders to deliver Senor Plehve to the *Empresa* and Captain Ignacio Pinilla tomorrow morning. My life is forfeit if I fail to perform my duty. Thus I am indeed grateful to you. Both prisoners are safely in prison."

"Here is Dom's chest. He left it in the stables in Berko's charge. It was then brought to me by Sergeant Becker. I have waited to open it." He took a key from his pocket and handed it to Moses, who opened the lock and lifted the lid.

They looked into the open box and their faces paled. The captain-general turned to the sergeant and quietly ordered, "Place everything on the desk."

Scott instantly recognized Captain Bogaart's buttons. "These belonged to the captain of my ship, the *Nina Marie*."

Tomas soberly added, "The gold belongs to Tibela di Almagro."

The captain-general's voice was grim. "This is the head of Senor di Almagro, her husband."

Scott's mind reeled. Tibela was free! Gradually he became conscious again of the captain's voice.

"And so we can confront Dominick Plehve with the evidence that condemns him."

Scott fell into step with Tomas and they all proceeded down the long corridor to the dungeons below. They passed cages holding prisoners behind bars, and then down to a lower level with dark, foul-smelling cells lit only by torches. The end room

was large and several men sat on the floor eating with their fingers. Someone lay against the wall as if doubled up in pain. The native captives were cannibals. They glanced slyly at the five men looking in at them. Scott saw that there was one a white man with a slack body. He was motionless and stared vacantly at the food in his hands. His body was obviously infested by vermin, fever, and raw alcohol.

"Dominick Plehve," the captain-general called. The fellow did not seem to hear the summons.

"*This is Dominick Plehve?*" Scott asked in amazement.

"Yes," the doctor answered. "There is venom in his system from snake and spider bites, also fever from dysentery. He is also showing the ravages of a raw alcohol which drives men mad."

Scott watched in mounting pity and revulsion. The captain-general then pointed to another man who lay against the wall in pain. "This is Puka, the chief of the cannibals."

The doctor spoke in a grim voice. "Well, he will not recover from syphilis brought to him by his white friends. It is almost always fatal to the Indians." He turned to the captain-general. "Dominick Plehve is in no condition to be questioned, as you can see, sir."

They made their way back to the office where Julio was waiting. "Senor Scott, the senor Jens sends word that the pirate captain's boat and another have come into the river where your ship sank. He wishes you to come now."

"Sergeant Becker and two men will go with you," the captain-general ordered. "I must stay in the city for there are pirate threats to our bastion."

"I gladly accept your assistance, sir. You have been most liberal with your cannon shot and powder." Scott raised his hand in a swift farewell and hurried away, with Julio and the soldiers. When they reached the Indian encampment, Scott saw that Jens was directing Abraham and his four husky black men in the final setting up of the two cannons. Ammunition and powder were nearby. The Indians had also completed part of a stockade with large timbers sunk on end into the ground.

With a grin, Scott saw that the old priest was seated on a high platform where he could watch, and also direct, the activities.

Scott chuckled to himself, thinking that the old man's prayers were becoming more familiar than his curses.

"We see many changes." Chief Lamoni greeted Scott with a smile. "All good differences since you have come to our land. We do not have cannibal raids, the pirates have left us alone, and the old priest is helping my people instead of cursing them."

Jens gripped Scott's hand. "Around the bend of the river is a pirate ship and on the horizon is yet another." He turned to pat one of the big guns. "We may soon have a use for these."

"My warriors are ready," Chief Lamoni said. "We fight behind the poles in the ground. We have many arrows and my people know how to use them."

"I do believe that you are looking for a fight, chief," Jens laughed.

"War is not good, but the pirates know where there is weakness and we have been weak. Now we are strong and they must know this. We can show them only in battle."

As darkness crept across the land, small fires were built well back in the thick foliage where there was no possibility of being seen by approaching pirates. Scott sat beside Chief Lamoni, Jens, Moses, and Abraham, bringing them up to date.

Jens spoke indignantly. "It's a damned good thing they caught those two criminals. Dominick Plehve, in his way, is worse than Puka." But Jens' thoughts were never far from the work in hand. "Scott, I've not had time to try out these cannons and it worries me. What is our battle plan?"

"Gann is as yet unaware that Dominick Plehve and Puka have been taken. Tomorrow he and his men plan to come ashore, meet Plehve and pick up the new slaves. They'll take them back to his boat. Here," he made a small circle in the sand with a stick. "I will board their ship after the pirates leave. Sergeant Becker, plus two men, will accompany me. As Gann and his men leave their longboats here on the shore, Jens will blow them out of the water. That will cut off their escape."

"They will die before they let you take over their ship, Scott," Jens warned. "It's too risky. Let me blow it up also. It can keep our own *Nina Marie* company among the rocks."

Scott spoke grimly. "When the *Nina Marie* was sunk, we lost

our ship and cargo. Some may still be on their ship. I intend to take it—and the cargo. And if we capture Gann, we will get a reward from the English crown.”

“I still say it’s too risky, Scott, but I know you’ll do it anyway.” Jens stirred restlessly, still concerned.

Scott got to his feet. “We will move out before daylight. Julio will lead and he will then come back to help here. Abraham, and the black men can help Jens. Try to take prisoners, but do not endanger your people.” He picked up his blanket and wound it around him before he stretched out on the ground. “Any questions?”

There were none and they turned to their rest.

Although his body was weary, Scott’s mind was active. He had many things he had to consider. Dominick Plehve was no longer a threat. The plans were set for tomorrow. Perhaps some hours from now he would again have a ship and cargo. Either that or he would lie deep in the lagoon with his *Nina Marie*—or be taken as a slave with William. Could it be possible that his friend might still be aboard Gann’s vessel? But how could that be? There had been many months between. Time for his leg to heal, then the weeks of helping Tibela in the search for her son. Still, if William had been kept for ransom, there was a possibility, a small one, but still it was there. Oh, please to god. . . .

He stretched again and his mind at last relaxed. Gradually his thoughts turned to the gentle Tibela. Her husband’s death was verified. Her son was returned to her. His mind reached out to touch her smooth velvety cheek and he thought with pleasure of embracing her closely again. His hand was on the hilt of Solomon ben Adhem’s sword as he dropped into a deep sleep.

When morning came, a deep mist lay over the river. It reminded Scott of the day the *Nina Marie* had been blasted out of the water by Captain Gann. Well, this time it would be different!

Bark canoes had been brought from the forest on his command. Now he was a little worried that the pirates would leave their ship before the mists rose and enter the Indian encampment without being seen. Oh, they would be taken, of course, but it would mean many deaths and injuries.

The forest came alive now and birds flew from the tree perches above the mists to their feeding grounds. Suddenly Scott heard the muffled sound of an oarlock and he peered into the dense mist. It seemed to be getting thicker, but then it lifted a few feet above the waterline. He could see four longboats moving up the river.

Scott's men climbed into canoes and put their own backs silently to their oars, moving their boats out of sight. Then, looming from the mist, they saw a large ship coming toward them. The river was deep and narrow at this point. Scott started to lift his hand in a signal when he saw the outline of a second ship several hundred yards away. It had the long sweet lines of a galleon, with three masts, square sails, and a lateen mizzen. The roar of a cannon moved him to action. His men stooped low in the canoes as they slipped into the current that carried them downstream.

The pirate ship's remaining crew were at the rails looking toward shore to see what was happening. Scott and his men climbed silently aboard their far side.

"Throw down your weapons," Scott commanded.

The men at the rails turned as one to charge at them. Their battle cries died in their throats as arrows hit them before they took a dozen steps. Suddenly it seemed all danger from the pirates was over.

A warning shout from the bow told of a new threat—two huge pirates, Swede and Ox. Without awareness, Scott would have been dead, but they met the charge with ease.

Ox fought for his own gratification. He had lived violently and was a man without principles. He felt confident.

The Swede worked around so that his back was to Ox. He felt certain of defeating the giant red-haired cripple. He laughed as he thrust and parried.

Scott gave his utmost to this battle. Distantly he heard the sound of Jens' cannon. He found difficulty in keeping his pegleg under him on the slippery wet deck. The sword in his hand seemed to become alive and, suddenly, the big Swede jumped backwards and drove Ox off balance. As the man fell to his knees, Scott thrust forward.

The Swede also lost his balance. Scott's sword sliced through the muscles of his brown arm but he laughed through tight lips.

Shouting obscenities, he charged recklessly. Scott took a backward step and slipped on the wet deck.

As his wooden leg flew up from the floor, the downward swing of the pirate's cutlass was stopped by the hard wood. The Swede had leaped to give a final death thrust when the powerful thrust of the pegleg caught him in his belly and he was dumped breathlessly onto his side.

Both men were back on their feet at the same time, but now all the laughter was gone from Swede's face. He backed away and looked fearfully at his freely bleeding arm. His breath came in painful gasps and a whimper escaped from his throat. Suddenly he sank to his knees and tried to press against the blood that gushed between his fingers. He covered his face with his fingers, waiting for the sword thrust that would end his life.

The Indians moved forward at Scott's brief motion to take him prisoner. Then Scott and Moses stood still, gulping in great draughts of fresh air.

At last Scott gasped, "Who warned us?" They moved to the bow and stared at a man bound by chains—William.

"William, I thought you were dead—but I hoped, oh, how I hoped—and now you're safe."

"I thought many times that death was near. Gann and his men were sure that they could ransom me for a big sum. Lately, though, I felt they were about to give up on that idea."

Moses found keys to unlock the chains and William soon was free.

Scott gripped his friend's hand. "Now I can face Ruth, my friend. Oh, it is so good to have you back at my side."

Moses pointed at the shore. "Look at Jens." The second ship was under fire. A pirate flag had been raised as the gunners found the range. The first of the cannons caused splashing around her, but the second found its mark, tearing the top gallant sail. Pellets whirled across the decks like giant hail. Scott heard the shot so close that he ducked. He watched as missiles ripped through sails, splintered spars, cracked her mizzen topmast, and split it away.

The Indians cheered wildly as shot after shot rendered the *Sweet Lilly* helpless. But not one touched her beautiful hull.

Suddenly Moses chuckled. It grew into a deep belly laugh as he pointed. A group of pirates stood before a canoe. Arrows

were pointed at them and they held their hands on top of their heads while Jens talked and pointed his finger at them.

Scott joined in the laughter. "He's giving them a lecture." He turned to the men. "Now we have a job to do. We'll get this ship under sail and then tow the *Sweet Lilly* into port with her cargo of slaves." He slapped Moses and William on the back. We have two ships and we'll get head money for the pirates. Moses, have your men take word to Jens to bring all prisoners overland to the garrison. Tell him of our plans to meet him in Belem."

William took a deep breath. As they walked to the captain's cabin, they heard splashing as the dead were thrown overboard.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"The Honorable Lucio di Cavalcante, governor by appointment of the king, presiding," droned the court clerk.

Scott looked over the occupants of the courtroom. They were: the captain-general with his arm in a sling, Doctor Jacob ben Joseph, and Tomas Gomez, the banker. He saw Ignacio Pinilla, captain of the *Empresa*, come in quietly and sit down beside Tomas.

"Gentlemen," said Cavalcante, "Let us proceed." He glanced over his eyeglasses to see that he had everyone's attention. "In the matter of Dominick Plehve, the former judge of this court," his eyebrows joined together in a deep frown. "I am distressed that a man appointed by the chief administrator has so disgraced his office."

He leaned over and rustled some papers on his desk, then picked one up. "I have here a letter from the crown ordering the arrest of the aforementioned. The accused was served this notice aboard your ship?" Honorable Cavalcante inquired of Captain Pinilla.

"He was. I served it myself."

The governor turned his attention to the clerk. "You have all this written down?"

"Yes sir," the clerk responded. Cavalcante slapped his fat hand gleefully on the desk top. "Captain, please tell the court exactly what happened after you read the warrant to the accused."

"Yes sir. The captain-general, Manuel de Souza, was present. I gave the warrant to him saying that Plehve was in his custody and he was solely responsible to the king. It was, I said, required that he must deliver the prisoner to my ship on the day I sailed. The captain said that he understood and removed the prisoner from the ship." He drew a deep breath, then added, "I understand that the prisoner later escaped."

It was with sympathy that Scott watched de Souza take his silk handkerchief from his sleeve and wipe his face and neck. The man showed excessive discomfort and his face jerked with nervous twitches. He stared hard at the ship's captain.

"You say that the prisoner, Dominick Plehve, has escaped?"

"That is the report I received, Your Honor."

The governor turned his black piercing eyes upon the captain-general and then back to the ship's captain.

"When does your ship sail, captain?"

"On the tide at daybreak, Your Honor."

The governor turned slightly. "Captain-General Manuel de Souza, are you prepared to hand your prisoner over to Captain Pinilla before sailing time?"

"Yes, Your Honor, he can be delivered now, if the captain so desires," answered the captain-general, standing ramrod straight, his eyes focused over the head of the governor.

Captain Pinilla faced the captain-general. "But I was told that he escaped!" he shouted. "I must see him."

De Souza's face became bright red. "You doubt my word, sir?" he asked through his teeth.

"Gentlemen, I will have no more of this or you will both be in contempt of my court," Cavalcante stated loudly.

During this exchange, Scott noticed that an orderly had requested Sergeant Becker to step outside. He returned quickly and approached De Souza to whisper a message.

"I will have no whispering in my court. Does your message

have any relevance to these proceedings?" The governor's stubby finger pointed at the captain-general.

"Yes, Your Honor, it does."

"Well? What do you have to say?"

"I have just been informed that I cannot deliver my prisoner."

"Sir," said the clerk, "I am confused. I don't know how to record those last comments."

The governor waved his hand impatiently toward him. "Never mind that now!" He turned again to the captain-general.

"Has your prisoner escaped? Well?" he repeated. "Has he escaped?"

"No."

"Then why in hell can't you deliver him?"

"He is dead, Your Honor."

Doctor Jacob ben Joseph spoke up. "Governor, I will go to the garrison and check the report."

"Thank you, doctor. I appreciate that." He turned to the ship's captain. "You will also go to satisfy yourself, Captain Pinilla. Return here quickly." His voice was dry.

As the two men left, the governor conferred with the clerk about his report. Scott and Moses stepped to the back of the room with Tomas following.

"What happened, Moses?" Scott asked.

"The cannibal, Chief Puka, killed him." His face twisted. "I believe they would have eaten him if we had not carried out the body."

"I wonder how this affects the warrant," Tomas asked.

"I don't think there will be any problems. Captain Pinilla can take the corpse if he wants. At least Plehve can't send us to the Inquisition now." Moses seemed relieved.

The governor's voice called out, "Gentlemen, let us resume. We have a few more matters to discuss." He looked at some notes.

"The captured pirates will be taken to Portugal for trial. They are, Captain Eli Gann and Captain Barnabas Whitt. They no doubt will be hung there. Their men will be sentenced and hung here."

He found another paper and held it up. "We found one

hundred and twenty-seven slaves. They will be sold at auction. The head money will be paid to Captain Scott Bolinski of the Dutch East India Company. The two captured vessels as well as their cargos will also go to him as reparation. An inventory will be made of the cargo's value and a tax will be assessed for the crown. I am glad the pirate incursions of our coast have been brought to an end." He paused, took a deep breath, wiped his face with a silk handkerchief, then looked at Scott.

"Captain Bolinski, the court will notify you of further meetings to resolve these items. You are excused at this time."

Scott stood up and gave a slight bow to the governor. "Thank you, Your Honor."

Moses winked at Scott as he left the courtroom.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Scott jumped from his chair and strode across the wooden floor of the veranda, his wooden leg pounding loudly against the planks. With his hand, he shaded his eyes against the glare of the late afternoon sun. There was an urgency in the way the rider was spurring his horse and it could only mean trouble. Scott felt a quickening of his pulse.

Doctor Jacob ben Joseph rushed to his side. "It's Julio," he said. "He is riding one of Senora Tibela's horses." Scott nodded and walked down the steps to meet him.

"Senor Scott," cried Julio, "a seaman from an anchored ship is in port asking questions about your ship, the *Nina Marie*." A servant led his sweating horse away and the three men stood in the hot sun considering the news.

Scott felt excitement building. "What is the name of this ship?" he asked.

"It is called, *The Eagle*. It will dock on the oncoming tide."

Scott considered for a moment. "That will be in the morning. I will be there." He paused. "There are more than three hundred Dutch East India Company boats and it is remote that

I will know the captain, but I will take that chance. Excuse me, senors, I will tell William the news."

At daylight, Scott and William walked to the end of the wharf and searched the fading darkness for signs of *The Eagle*. They could see a few men on standby for the ship's arrival.

"It's an unscheduled ship," said the wharfmaster. "We have no freight to load, nor are we expecting cargo."

"Then it is a ship sent to search for us," said William. Scott looked into the anxious face of his friend, noting the paleness and lines of suffering. His thoughts were interrupted as William suddenly pointed. "Scott, I can see her masts! She'll be here shortly."

The men strained their eyes until the ship loomed out of the darkness and was silhouetted against the first light. It looked like a huge eagle as it rode smoothly in on the tide. A horn call was answered by the wharfmaster, who barked orders to workmen. The sound of voices from the ship and snatches of conversation in the familiar Dutch language brought eager smiles to Scott and William's faces.

Members of the local band hurried to take their places in formation. The drummer banged loudly and children cheered and cried for more, but the bandmaster directed a frown and an oath that quieted them.

The captain-general arrived on his showy white horse with Sergeant Becker riding at his side. Troops followed on foot, stifling their yawns. Scott caught the eye of Senor ben Joseph and his friends and raised a friendly hand in recognition.

As the ship neared, they could see the company symbol on her side and the huge Dutch flag fluttering in the morning breeze. When ropes were tossed to the waiting hands, the band struck up a welcoming tune. A great cheer went up from the large crowd as the ship eased up against the wharf and ropes secured it. A second cheer almost deafened the ears as the gangplank was lowered. The captain-general and Sergeant Becker stepped aboard.

Esther and Ruth stood at the ship's rail. They looked down on the crowd pensively. Though the band music was festive,

their hearts were heavy. This was the fourth port in which they had stopped to inquire about the *Nina Marie*. At each one, they had news, but so far there was no mention of survivors. This could be just another halt in their long search. Suddenly, Esther clutched her daughter's arm and pointed, her voice too tight to speak. She saw a shining red head of hair, like a banner in the crowd below. "That has to be Scotty and look, I'm sure William is by his side." Her knuckles whitened from gripping the rail.

They hurried to the gangway and Esther ran over to her husband. "Kurtsev," she cried. "It's Scotty!"

Sampson and Kurtsev followed her! Moses Becker recognized his sister with astonishment, then relaxed in a wide smile as he watched her disappear into the crowd below. Esther! She'd be surprised—and there'd be time enough for that when these formalities were over.

It was late afternoon, the evening meal was over, and for the first time since his parents had arrived, Scott felt free to leave. His father had found a great deal in common with the doctor and they were entertaining the other guests with lively anecdotes.

Esther looked at Scott with questioning eyes as he rose to leave. He kissed her forehead and excused himself. "I'll be back shortly," he said.

Scott quickly saddled a big sorrel gelding from the doctor's stables and, as he went through the gates, kicked him into a brisk canter. Little puffs of dust stirred up as the horse galloped along and Scott's thoughts were also stirred up. He had hoped to settle in this lush land, but now his mother insisted that he return to their home in Amsterdam. It all depended on Tibela, he thought, at least as far as he was concerned. This would perhaps be his last visit with Tibela alone, for the *Eagle* had a full cargo for Recife and would be sailing soon.

He rode through Tibela's gates and stopped to look at the grounds. He was amazed and pleased at all the work that had been done. He knew that she had rented groups of black slaves that waited in cages for their auction. With a somber smile, he realized they must be pleased to get away from there, even for this work.

Julio saw his arrival and was there to greet him. Tibela rose from her chair and came to the steps. Her heart pounded as she looked upon the man she loved. Their nights together in the terrifying jungles and the days on the dangerous trails—his devotion to her in time of need had strengthened her admiration into love. Now that her husband was dead, she was free to hear Scott's declaration of the adoration she was sure he had for her. She wanted to rush down the steps and throw herself into his strong arms.

Scott smiled at her, but there was reserve in his countenance that held her exuberance in check. She offered her hand to him and felt a slow return of her pleasure at the touch of his warm hand on hers.

"You approve of what we are doing to my grounds, Scott?" she asked.

"A very nice change!" he looked down at her with laughter. "You, too look different, rested, Tibela."

"Oh, yes—and now my child is safe at home and my problems have been solved. I owe it all to you, my friend, my very dear friend. My little son is back in my arms. I have the money to meet my debts and return my home and fields to beauty and production. The cannibals have been driven away and we are protected from the pirates. Scott, I am so grateful."

"I did not do it alone, my sweet, but I am glad things are now right for you." Scott thought of her word, "grateful"—nothing more. He felt chilled.

Tibela looked about her acres of tropical fruit; guavas, and papayas; her fields of cane, her lovely home and the distant fields of cattle. Scott's eyes followed her gaze. But the excitement had faded from her eyes. She knew instinctively that Scott wanted to tell her something. Could he be leaving? The thought was a blow, but then her pride stiffened. She had thought their coming together in the jungles had been as meaningful to him, as it had been to her. But if he could leave her—without saying a word of wanting her. . . .

Impulsively she led the way into the house where servants were lighting lanterns in one room after another. They sat on velvet chairs in the large elegant room and Scott told her that Dr. Jacob ben Joseph was having a gala dinner. She and Chief Lamoni were invited. She merely nodded her understanding,

but did not say that she would come. He began to press for an answer when Julio tapped on the door. The Indian had come with his horse, for Scott must leave by dark.

Julio held the animal while Scott mounted. He felt a sense of deep frustration as Tibela raised her hand in farewell. Her eyes were dark wells of unhappiness.

Scott swore softly to himself as he rode away in a thundering gallop. A lantern held by a servant had reflected her brimming tears. He wanted to tell her that he wished to stay, but he felt that he must use judgement rather than impulse. He'd lost a leg here, it was true, but he had found an inner strength he'd not known he had. But caution had stayed his tongue.

Besides, if Tibela only felt "gratitude," then that wasn't enough for him. But he melted with tenderness when he remembered her soft length against him in the night. He wanted her, yes, and he needed her. Well, perhaps he could penetrate that barrier later.

Scott's arm was around his mother's shoulder. They walked alone in the doctor's beautiful gardens. The fragrance of jasmine, mignonette, angelica, mint, and verbena filled the air. Blossoming orange and lemon trees surrounded the lawn. They walked around the pool, watching the small exotic fish play in the water.

"I just find it hard to believe so much has happened to you. Your leg," Esther swallowed hard. "You have suffered, my son." They walked through the grape arbor and into a shady dell and sat on a white iron bench. Several gardeners were working on the yards.

"It has been an adjustment," Scott said quietly. "The hardest part was accepting it."

"Scotty, you will never know how I have missed you. And now you are alive and well." Esther turned on the seat so she could better look at him. "You are the picture of health, though. Thank God."

He squeezed his mother's hands. "I've not had the problems that you and father have experienced. No, little mother, my life has not had the tragedies that you have endured so well."

Esther smiled lovingly into his face. "But now, Scott, you will return home with us. My life is empty without you and your

father is restless with you away, as is Sampson. He has been exercising daily with the men this whole trip. He was sure he'd need to fight to free you. Say you'll come home, Scott. Not later, but now."

Scott sat with his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped before him. Tibela was secure financially and didn't need him. Her little son was safe. The cannibals had been defeated the chief had a good stockade and cannons to defend himself against pirate raids. And yet—he wanted—needed—to have love, to have her accept him. But she felt only gratitude. That would make a cold companion.

"Yes, mama, I will return with you." Now it was said. Esther's eyes brimmed with excitement. He felt dutiful yet saddened. The thin thread of his hope of winning the lovely Tibela was severed, as was his leg, and losing her was the harder of the two.

Esther took her son's arm as they rose from the bench and walked toward the veranda where Moses was talking with Roseanna.

Esther spoke musingly. "And to think after all these years I have finally found my brother. How much God has blessed us all." She was silent for a moment. "Scott, he isn't getting involved with that young woman, is he?"

"She is a very fine girl, mother, and she has had a difficult time."

"Yes, but married and a widow already and running around the jungle with a priest. Surely Moses couldn't be serious about such a marriage. We know nothing of her background or anything of her people."

Somehow Scott felt his sense of manhood fade and he was back in his mother's arms as a small boy.

Sampson was full of restless emotion as he walked from the iron gates of the doctor's house onto the road leading to the city. He walked for awhile and then returned. His thoughts were not at peace.

Scotty, now, with one leg. It was like seeing a masterpiece broken and defaced. He had prepared himself to battle beside the boy, but he wasn't needed. The more he thought of it, the more he realized he was left over from a distant past; old, with

no family, and no one who needed him. He walked more rapidly up the path, trying to escape his thoughts. As he turned a corner of the house, he nearly knocked over a girl who was pushing a crippled boy in a chair with wheels.

He was surprised and spoke swiftly in his native Greek. "Oh, pardon me," he stammered as he steadied the chair to prevent the little boy from falling.

"Please do not concern yourself. There is no harm done," she replied.

Sampson walked away. Then suddenly he realized that she had answered him in his own tongue. He stopped and turned around. The girl was also staring in his direction.

He held a hand toward her. "You are Greek?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I was born in Greece."

"Roseanna?" the child said.

Sampson touched her arm. "Roseanna?"

She looked at him, startled, ready to step back.

"Roseanna," he repeated softly, his voice tight with emotion.

Suddenly the veils of time dropped from her eyes and she held out a tentative hand. "Papa?" she said, staring. "Oh, papa!" she sobbed as she ran into his arms.

"My little one—Roseanna, my little girl." His jaw was clamped and his eyes glittered with unshed tears.

Kurtsev Bolinski paused in his dressing for the dinner, looking out of the window of the second story apartment of Jacob's mansion. He saw the well-cared-for fields stretching to the wide expanse of the river. Rays from the evening sun lit the tumbling dark waters and it looked like a fairy's creation. His thoughts turned back to Esther who was brushing her hair and talking of Senora Tibela di Almagro.

"I am distressed about her," she said. "She has only used Scott to further her own ends. She gave him womanly comfort when he lost his leg and now she plays on his sympathy."

She looked to Kurtsev for confirmation of her thoughts. Esther knew she was being somewhat unfair, but she had an agreement from Scott about his returning home and she wanted nothing to prevent that. She felt that it was best for him.

"The senora has been raised in this raw land," she added strongly, "and has not had the advantages of a good upbringing. Her loyalty seems more to her Indian blood than to her father's people. She has been married and has a son. Perhaps there have been other men."

Kurtsev was watching the beautiful sunset. She placed herself near him and put her hand on his muscular arm to pull him toward her. "Kurtsev, are you listening to me?" she demanded, looking up at him intently. A little frown appeared on her lovely forehead.

"Yes, dear. I hear the words of a loving mother caught in a conflict of emotion. You thought Scott was lost to us and now you have found him safe. It is indeed like having him born all over again. You want to hold, to possess him. It's very natural, my dear, but another conflict comes because you also know that he will never be your little boy again. He has strong, manly desires of his own. He feels his love for you, his mother, and the duty he feels toward your wishes."

"Duty!" cried Esther, taking her hand from his arm and turning her back to him. "He has no need to think of duty to his mother. There is *only* love and, if there is none, he is free." Her bitterness had turned quickly to humility. She put herself into Kurtsev's embrace. "I only want what is best for Scott," she said softly.

"Tibela is a most extraordinary young woman," he said, "one that would be capable of matching Scott's boundless energies and ambitions. He spoke to me at length, when we first arrived, of the great possibilities in this land. There are thousands of acres to tame and cultivate, great riches in timber and mining, and trees with a substance that runs from their bark that has possibilities for industrial use."

Esther interrupted him. He sounded as if he agreed with Scott. "What about the shipping company? You and he both have your futures there!"

"My future, little sweetheart," Kurtsev said, "is with the company. I am now a company man. This is my life. Scott's blood runs hot and he should do what he desires." Scott has proved he is a real man, little mother. He has lost a leg, which would end the fighting days of many men, but he has overcome

his handicap and succeeded where many would fail. He has said nothing of his successes, but I have learned the full details from others."

Esther clung to his arm. "Are you suggesting that we leave him here—to this married woman?"

Kurtsev's eyes followed a sailing vessel coming from the deepest reaches of the Amazon and heading to sea on the river's current. He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her near him. "No, my dear, I'm not suggesting that. I am saying that he is a man and should make his own decisions. His happiness is our first concern."

"It is for that very reason that I have had him promise me that he will sail with us tomorrow. We must hurry, Kurtsev," Esther reminded him. "Dinner will be served shortly."

Kurtsev watched as his wife sat before the mirror, giving a final touch to her face and hair. Like all mothers, Esther had seen that her son's heart was awakening to a new and different love, and she felt the estrangement. As this thought went through his mind, it was quickly followed by another. She must release Scott from that foolish promise, on her own accord, and without reservation—before sailing time. He watched tenderly as she rose. They left the apartment and walked down the carpeted steps to the ballroom below.

Many of the dinner guests were there, chatting gaily. Scott came forward, giving his mother his hand and his father a wide smile of comradeship.

Jacob joined them. "Come," he said, "there are some here you have not met." Seated on a chair, dressed in a flowing red robe embroidered with gold and silver, was the old priest. On his head was the velvet hat of his holy office. "Father, may I present the parents of Senor Scott."

Kurtsev and Esther bowed over the old priest's extended hand and a smile of saintly sweetness crept over his face. "I am most honored," he said. He extended his hand toward Jens, who stood nearby. "And this is my son, Jens Anders."

Kurtsev acknowledged the introduction with a wink at the red-faced Dane. "Yes, I have met him previously."

Their host continued. "And may I present Senor and Senora Lucio di Cavalcante, the governor of our land and his lady."

Kurtsev bowed, for he always maintained a show of gallantry

and deference. His good-natured tolerance and politeness had won him a place close to many of the royal families of the western world. Esther was stylish and beautiful but maintained a humble graciousness.

Scott felt a sense of pride as he watched his parents. They were the center of attention and were charming and solicitous. As he waited, he looked around. Black waiters, in dress coats and white vests, served. Flowers were banked on the mantels and fireplaces and their beauty and fragrance were delicate and pleasing. The rustle of silk and the pleasant hum of voices could be heard.

Esther noted how well Scott mingled with the group. But her smile faded when Senora di Almagro arrived. Scott's color rose and his eyes followed her. He was first to greet the girl, but she seemed unaware of it as she turned toward her host. Scott did not hide his disappointment well and Esther felt anger stir at her son's embarrassment.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Ruth, who placed her hand on her mother's arm. She looked the very embodiment of life and youth. "Did you see poor Scott?" she whispered. "He's in love with Tibela di Almagro and she is treating him distantly! The last time I saw them together, they both appeared so differently! Mama, what do you suppose has happened between them?"

William was near and he came to Ruth. He smiled and touched her arm. Esther thought him fine looking in his officer's uniform, most courtly and polished for one so young. *Yet he is taking away my daughter. I am glad Scott will be at home.* But then—doubt came into her mind. Was she indeed thinking of Scott's happiness or—her own?

"Ruth," William laughed, "You deserted me. If it were for anyone other than your mother, I would be jealous."

"What do you mean?" she asked, taking his arm coyly. "I see your eyes follow the beautiful Senora Tibela di Almagro!"

"Yes, but I was also watching Scott. It appears there is a lovers' quarrel." He looked searchingly into Esther's wide eyes. "Oh, I hope I have not said the wrong thing. My humble apologies, please."

Esther intertwined her arms with Ruth and William and guided them toward Kurtsev. "No, William, you only bring me

joy, as your family has always done. There are many changes in one's life and sometimes it is difficult to adjust."

Ruth drew her mother's attention toward Sampson and Roseanna. The girl was standing between her father and Moses. She looked at each of them with almost worshipful attention.

For the next hour, waiters glided in and out with heavy trays of deliciously prepared foods. Esther sat far from Tibela and could not speak to her. However, as the meal progressed, she noticed that Senora Tibela received more and more attention. Everyone seemed to hang onto her replies and enjoy her light musical laughter. There was no doubt about the girl's charm. She impressed everyone with her knowledge of the crops and the country in general. She was also profoundly religious. Esther also watched her son. His eyes rarely strayed from Tibela and he paid little attention to his food.

At last the dinner ended with Doctor ben Joseph's toast to everyone's good health. Then the servants brought wraps and the coaches gathered at the entry. The night was warm but clouds had gathered and distant rumbling of thunder echoed from the deep forest. The governor and his wife were escorted to their carriage by the doctor. Jens accompanied the priest to his vehicle, carrying him easily in his arms, and set him on the soft cushions. Tomas and his wife left next.

The doctor asked the rest of the party to remain a few minutes more. He led the way to the drawing room. "I think it is time now for Scott to show his parents and our little group the famous Bolinski sword.

Scott opened a nearby closet and with great dignity drew out the gleaming blade.

Kurtsev moved across the room with a few quick steps. His face glowed with pleasure as the polished steel caught the beams from the oil lamps. Esther's eyes brimmed with excitement as she told of her father's valiant fight with barbarians and how Kurtsev had broken out of prison and fought and won freedom for her and others with her father's treasured weapon.

"And my wife and I were among those that you helped to escape," the doctor said quietly.

Esther watched Tibela and Scott look at each other and recognized the hunger in her son's eyes. She looked again at the

sword in Kurtsev's hand and her mind's eye went back to the time when, as a girl, she ran in the fields with Kurtsev, his strong grip pulling her to safety.

She remembered the tender experiences of their married life. She, a Jew, and Kurtsev, a Russian, but nevertheless true love. Her hand went to her mouth, for her heart again had spoken, as it had done when she knew she belonged to Kurtsev. Now she realized that Scott and Tibela must be together. The look on her son's face told her it was so. It had not been planned in a parlor between parents, but rather had been built while facing death together, sharing hardships in the crucible of suffering. Yes, it was obvious that love had emerged, though unbidden and unplanned.

She caught her son's eye and bid him come to her as she stood at the window. She took his hand. "Scott, I have not understood. Is your happiness here?"

Scott's thoughts had been so centered on Tibela's sad face that he had only vaguely heard the words of his mother. He searched her eyes. Had he heard correctly? Only a short time before, he had promised to return to Amsterdam. He was still prepared to keep that promise, though it had caused him great anguish and pain. More than that which he had felt as he laid in an Indian shanty with a rotting stump of a leg and no desire to live. The face of the princess came before his eyes. She had given him purpose, a desire to live. The name *Tibela*, *Tibela*, *Tibela*, pounded in his brain. He dared not ask, and yet he must know, his mother's meaning.

"Mother? What are you saying?"

She smiled into the anxious face of her handsome son. He had the hawkish stamp of her father in his face and yet she could also see Kurtsev's look in his deep intelligent eyes. "Your happiness is here, my son."

"Yes. I love this land and the people, little mother."

"And one in particular, my son? I yearn so for your future. I had hoped for a good girl from home and to have you near me." She sighed. "But if that is not to be . . ." She looked long at Tibela. "She is beautiful, but are you sure you love her?"

Scott nodded. "But my cause is hopeless. I think she no longer needs me. And besides, what girl wants half a man?"

Esther gripped her son's fingers, feeling his pain. "My, dear,

love is not dependent on need." Her eyes turned again toward Tibela and she clutched his arm. "Scott, hurry, she is leaving. You must stop her!"

Suddenly Scott could not let his love go and he moved with long purposeful strides toward her. Everyone in the room stopped talking to watch.

Tibela saw Scott moving toward her. He had an air that brought a sparkle to her eyes and her spirit leaped to meet his look. She took a step toward him, then stopped. He must make the full effort, she thought.

Kurtsev looked across at Esther. She nodded her head slightly and he smiled tenderly at her. He could see that her eyes brimmed with tears, but he went on with his conversation, for now his little Esther had come . . . as always . . . to a good decision. She had to let her son go.

Scott reached Tibela's side and slipped an arm around her waist. Smoothly and commandingly, he drew her out into the silence of the veranda.

They walked into the shadows. Somehow no explanations were necessary. The princess lifted her head, his mouth came down on hers. He felt her heart beat heavily against his ribs and held her closer still until they clung together as one. He felt the salt of her tears in his mouth and reluctantly drew away.

"Tibela?" There was an urgent question in his voice.

"Oh, Scott, I thought you were leaving because you didn't want me." Her voice was tremulous.

"You love me!" Scott exclaimed. "Leave you? Not now, sweetheart, now that you love me! Where I go, you go. Where I am, there you will be." He waited for an answer.

Tibela looked soberly at him, though there was laughter in her eyes. "You *do* love me, Scott?"

For a moment he was staggered. "Love you? Of course I love you. What do you think this is all about? You silly girl. How can I help it?" He picked her up and whirled her around. Then he gathered her close for a deep, prolonged kiss. "Let's go tell the family," he whispered softly at last.

As Scott and Tibela came back into the warm room with their arms entwined, Esther embraced each of them. Kurtsev put his big hand on his son's shoulder and gave Tibela a loving

hug. "Scott is a very fortunate man!" Kurtsev raised his glass and drew everyone's attention. "Tomorrow I sail with the *Eagle* and soon two more ships will be added to the company fleet. My son has accomplished many things. Scott captured two pirate vessels. He has salvage rights to their cargos, and will be paid reward money as well. He has found my brother-in-law, Moses. Sampson's daughter is returned to him, and Senora Tibela's little son is rescued. But now, best of all—he has found himself a wife." He held his glass aloft. "To my son, Scotty, and his intended, Tibela. May the trail of their years together be happy."

Everyone drank to the couple and then Kurtsev said, "We have one more order of business to discuss. The family sword. It belonged to a great man, Esther's father, my friend, Solomon ben Adhem. After the escape from Voronezh, the sword was given to Menasseh for safekeeping. Esther later gave it to our son, Scott. He lost it to the pirates and it was subsequently recovered by Solomon's son, Moses. Now, the question is this. To whom does the sword belong?"

Moses spoke up. "My father would have wanted you to have it, Kurtsev. Now you have given it to your son, my father's grandson. He would be happy."

"Your father was a generous man, Moses, but I am sure that it would please him for you, his youngest son, to have his weapon. By right, it is yours." Kurtsev handed the shining blade to him.

Moses took it in his hands. Then he turned to Roseanna with a questioning look. "Is it all right to tell them?"

She nodded her head.

"Roseanna has consented to become my wife and her father has given his consent." Moses' voice was firm with happiness and he took her hand in his.

"I have had her under my care for several weeks now, my friend," the doctor said. "She has great depth of character. You have made a wise choice and perhaps you can give her the happiness that she has had too little of."

Moses looked around the group. "I can give her my love and my trust—if that will give her happiness." His eyes sought Roseanna's.

She looked at him with a smile. Then her dark lashes came

down to fan her ivory cheeks and a blush rose from her gown to suffuse her cheeks and neck. Her eyes lifted as she softly said, for his ears only, "I give my love, my heart, to you." Her voice carried in the stillness.

Scott reached for Tibela's hand and her eyes flew to his.

Kurtsev's eyes met Esther's and their thoughts were as one, as so often had happened in their union.

Sampson held the sword of Solomon ben Adhem in his hands and his fingers traced the etched Hebrew inscription. "Isn't this the Jewish tradition of trust and faith? Next year In Jerusalem."

"Yes. Next Year In Jerusalem," echoed around the room.

Book Three

SWORD OF LIBERATION



Chapter Thirty-Nine

MAY, 1819

The tall gangling boy loved the early morning, for the day belonged to him until the sun peaked through the trees and over the roof of the stables.

Kurt's thoughts went with excitement to his experiences of yesterday. What a marvelous day that had been! First, he'd saved his Lordship's horse, Red, from abuse, even though by an odd throw he'd broken the jockey's hand. It had taken him several minutes to calm the terrified young stallion, and then he'd gone back to work.

He was down to the cleaning of the last stall when Mr. Brewster, the stable master, shouted for him. "Lad, Lord Jeffrey wishes to see you. Step lively, now, and mind your manners. Tuppling will show you the way."

They started out side by side, but Tuppling's nose rose an inch or so at the strong ammonia odor that clung to Kurt. He put out a restraining hand, and with an aloof look, he directed Kurt to walk behind him.

The path made a wide swing around to the steps of the main wing of the house. Tuppling led Kurt, wide-eyed, up the steps,

through the great hall, and stopped to tap discreetly at a double set of doors decorated with brass studs.

From inside the room came the pleasant voice of his Lordship as he said, "Come."

Tuppling opened one of the huge doors and announced, "Master Bolin, as you requested, sir."

"Ah, yes. Thank you, Tuppling." The tall regal Lord Jeffrey was seated at the desk. With a wave of his hand, he indicated that Kurt should sit.

Kurt gripped his hat in both hands, sat on the edge of the chair, and looked eagerly around him.

"How old are you, young man?" The quiet cultured voice held a touch of amusement.

"I'm sixteen, tomorrow, sir," Kurt answered politely.

"I would have guessed older." He paused, then added, "I see that you have an interest in my trophies."

Kurt was frankly gazing at all the things that decorated the walls of the big study. There were stuffed heads of big game, a collection of swords, pikes, and other weapons, along with a rack of brown Bess muskets.

"You have a keen eye for weapons, lad."

"My grandfather has taken me to museums and showed them to me, but I have never been this close to any before."

Lord Jeffrey was enjoying the boy's interest. Suddenly Kurt went to a small bronze statue and dropped on one knee to study it more carefully.

"Can you tell me about that, my boy?"

"Oh yes, sir. It is a sculpture of Saint George." Kurt rose to his feet and turned to face Lord Jeffrey. "I do appreciate your letting me see it, sir. It's beautiful."

The older man had been well aware of the strong barn smell on Kurt, and while it was not objectionable at the stables, it was a bit overpowering for the study. Thus he suggested, "Let us finish our discussion outside. There are seats there, and my daughters are due back from their ride." As they walked through the great hall, Lord Jeffrey continued speaking "I appreciate your good services in looking after my mount, Rex. I always appreciate loyalty, my boy."

Kurt felt some embarrassment and mumbled his thanks.

As they walked out onto the flagstone veranda, Lord Jeffrey

gave an exclamation of satisfaction. "Ah, here are my girls. They usually come racing headlong, which I have forbidden. But they seem to do as they please." He sighed, then added, "Without their mother, I am afraid I am much too lenient."

The girls rode their horses up to the bottom of the steps and the youngest, a child about thirteen, jumped off and came running up to her father. Her hair was loose in a long silken mane that looked the color of chestnut.

"Daddy, I'm not going to ride with Lillian any more. All she does is read those old poems, and she makes me listen to her." She turned and looked at Kurt, and her nose wrinkled in distaste at the smell. "Phew—who are you?"

"Megan, this is the lad who saved Rex from a beating. Lad, this my impudent thirteen-year-old daughter, Megan."

"Oh, Daddy, you don't have to say my age. Besides, I'll soon be fourteen."

The older girl, Lillian, came more sedately up the steps.

Suddenly, two huge shepherd dogs came bounding onto the veranda. Megan stooped to rub their shaggy heads, "My Hansel and Gretel," she cooed.

Their eyes were hidden under long hair, and their long red tongues dripped with sweat. They were obviously the younger girl's pets, and both shoved against her for attention. One of them became curious and turned in an instant to leap at Kurt, putting his large paws against the boy's chest. The unexpected movement caused him to stagger against the low wall, and he went tumbling awkwardly backward into the soft soil of the garden. The dogs, thinking it was a game, both leaped upon him with slobbering tongues. Lillian and Lord Jeffrey leaned over the wall to see that he was not hurt. Megan ran down the steps to help him, but Kurt was already on his feet, his face flaming with embarrassment.

"Are you all right, lad?" Lord Jeffrey asked.

Kurt stepped out of the garden, trying to walk normally as the dogs crowded against his legs, while Lillian disappeared into the dark cavern of the hall. There was a hint of a smile tugging at Lord Jeffrey's lips, but Megan laughed outright, looking teasingly up into Kurt's face, "Humpty-Dumpty, sat on a wall—", she sang.

Her father spoke sharply to her, "Megan, that's enough. The boy could have been hurt."

The girl laughed again as she ran toward the horses standing nearby. "Humpty-Dumpty and I will take the horses to the stables." Imperiously, she motioned Kurt to hurry. "Give me a hand up," she said as she took both reins, and put her foot in his hands. "I'll be back shortly, Daddy," she called over her shoulder.

Lord Jeffrey waved a hand and called, "Thank you again, young Kurt." He turned and followed Lillian into the house.

Megan handed Kurt the reins to Lillian's horse. "All right, young Kurt, mount up. Never walk when you can ride."

Kurt hesitated for a moment, and then his heart leaped to meet the challenge. He had ridden many times with his father, and he had been eager to try these magnificent animals. But a stable boy was not allowed on blood stock. Now, however, at the girl's demand, he leaped up and settled comfortably into the saddle. Then he reluctantly drew up on the reins of his mount, for he had chores to do, and he lacked the courage to take this liberty with Lord Jeffrey's horse.

Megan turned in her saddle, "What's the matter, Humpty-Dumpty? Are you afraid that you'll fall off?" She waved him to come with her. "We'll only to be gone for a minute or two. Besides, you work for me as well as my father. Do as you are told—unless you're afraid."

Kurt moved his horse up beside hers, and they started off at a walk. Megan moved her mount to a trot, and Kurt did the same. She laughed at his efforts to post, and then she began to gallop. Kurt was grateful, for he hated the jolting of the stiff trot. He took off his cap and stuffed it into his pocket, and his horse increased speed to keep up with the laughing girl. The coolness of the late afternoon was in the air, and Kurt breathed deeply, his heart stirring more than he ever recalled, as their horses seemed to skim over the earth.

Megan glanced back and her hair covered her face, but Kurt could see her shining eyes and her white teeth parted in a laugh. She shouted but the wind muffled the sound of her voice. She pointed with her whip to the jump ahead, and he barely caught the words, "Hold on—"

The great thoroughbred under him rose up and over, landing

with the cushion that only a fine horse can give. Kurt felt exalted. It was like a silent moment in space, that leap—and he had stayed on!

Megan had a concerned look on her face as she watched him, but she lifted her hand as she saw his success.

Kurt thought to himself that the girl knew how to treat a horse as she slowed to a walk. They rode in single file now, for Kurt did not want to act too familiar. In the last half mile, she trotted her horse so that she could enjoy Kurt's discomfort.

Kurt became concerned when he saw Mr. Brewster standing with hands on hips waiting for him. They rode to the west entrance where Megan stepped down and handed the reins to Kurt. He turned the horses around and walked them to the stables, riding one and leading the other.

As Kurt, dismounted, the stable master took the reins and handed them to a boy, then directed Kurt to follow him into his office. He took a seat behind his small desk, above which were framed prints of champion thoroughbreds. A few ribbons also hung there, all blue.

Kurt stood quietly before the desk, his cap in his hand. The last rays of the setting sun coming through the side window lit up his hair as though it was on fire. "And what might ye be doing on his Lordship's horse, lad?" It was evident that Mr. Brewster was having a struggle to control his temper. A stable boy riding with his Lordship's daughter was more than he could cope with! "Did her father give his consent for you to ride his horse? And to race off across the fields with the lass?"

Kurt was finding it difficult to explain. "No, sir," he answered weakly.

"Did the young mistress invite you to ride, first getting the permission from her father?"

Kurt voice was stronger now. "No, sir," he said. "Her father was unaware that I was riding his horse." He was becoming uneasy, for he did not want to get young Megan into trouble.

"Ye have set a bad example for the other lads. I must punish ye, ye know that, boy." He studied Kurt thoughtfully and knew he would never find a better worker. And the lass, Megan! He had observed the child as she grew, and since her mother had died, she had become willful, a cause for concern to all those around her. Oh, it was time that a firm hand be taken with the

lass. Everyone knew that Lord Jeffrey's efforts to find a suitable governess had been fruitless. Still, his own problem was Kurt.

The boy was a Jew, and as such, he was in a vulnerable position. As he looked at Kurt, his anger seeped away, for he was just a boy. Still, there must be some discipline for the sake of the other men. "For the next three weeks you will not have any days off, and you must understand that such a thing will never happen again. It is betraying the trust that is given to us by Lord Jeffrey, and that I will not have, lad."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. It will not happen again." With his head lowered, Kurt turned and left the little office. The loss of his free days would be a disappointment, not only to himself but to his mother and grandfather also. He would miss Sabbath and his grandfather's teachings, as well as their time at the synagogue together. But, oh, it had been worth it!

But all that had been yesterday. Today was his birthday—sixteen years old! Grandfather Roth would be there this evening and his mother would present him with the painting that had taken her so long to do. The first rays of the sun shone on the treetops now, and Kurt grinned as he thought he didn't want to be late—especially after yesterday. He rounded the corner of the barns and nearly ran into Mr. Brewster and Constable Higgins. Kurt nodded respectfully to the two men, and began his morning chores.

"Hold here a minute, Kurt," said Mr. Brewster, "the constable wishes a word with you."

Kurt paused, then followed the officer into Mr. Brewster's office. "He has a few questions for you."

The big constable seemed to fill the room with his bulky frame. Kurt watched the officer's stern features as he said quietly, "Lad, it is a cold morning and yet you wear no coat or jacket. Why?"

"Sir, I hardly ever wear a jacket. My work keeps me warm and I live close by."

"Do you ever wear a coat or jacket?"

"Oh yes, after rain or snow my mother insists."

The constable pointed to a paper sack sitting on the file cabinet. He withdrew a garment and shook it free, then held it out to Kurt. "Do you recognize this?"

"Yes, sir. It is mine."

"Were you in Lord Jeffrey's private study yesterday?"

"Yes, I was taken there by Tuppling, sir."

"I will verify that, constable. He came here for the lad."

"Yes, so I have been told. Young Kurt, have you been in that room since then?" He watched the boy intently.

"No, sir."

With a look of resignation, the policeman turned to the stable master. "I'm afraid that we will have to detain young Kurt until Lord Jeffrey returns home, or mayhap, not even have to bother him with it."

Kurt looked from one man to the other, and the stable master noticed how pale Kurt's face had become.

"What am I supposed to have done, sir?" he asked. He had a feeling of panic that was getting hard to control.

"We will discuss this further in my office," replied Constable Higgins. He led the way to a coach where another officer and driver waited. The officer stepped forward and snapped iron cuffs onto Kurt's wrists.

The boy looked pleadingly at the stable master. "My mother—" Then he gripped his jaws to stem the tears.

Mr. Brewster took a step forward. "I'm sorry, lad. I will let your mother know, and do what I can." He turned to the officer, "I strongly suggest that you check the activities of the jockey, Blackie Tibbs. He could likely shed light on this matter for you."

The constable spoke in a quiet voice, "Yes, Mr. Brewster, I have already made a note of that. One other thing, this matter should be resolved before Lord Jeffrey returns. His Lordship should not be inconvenienced with such a trivial matter. The statue has been found, but we must take stern measures so that nothing like this will happen again. We will find the culprit. Make no doubt of that."

Kurt strained forward for a last look at Mr. Brewster, who had turned and was entering his office. His face was pale and contrasted sharply with his mop of blazing red hair and his eyes were wide with panic and bewilderment.

As the coach pulled out onto the main road, Mr. Brewster walked the short distance to Mrs. Bolin's cottage. He knocked,

then remembered that this was her Sabbath, and she was no doubt at the synagogue. He would call on her later in the day. Besides, the boy would likely be home by nightfall.

As he returned to the stables, he saw his Lordship's girls. Little Megan would be demanding to know what had happened to Kurt. He guessed he would have to tell her. She'd already been asking the name of the red-haired stable boy. He'd have to tell her the boy had been taken to Old Bailey.

After Megan had taken a bath and put on a new dress from her father, she settled down in the garden. Her thoughts went to Kurt. The name of Humpty-Dumpty no longer seemed funny to her, though the thought of him falling over the wall, and Hansel and Gretel licking his face, brought a giggle from her. But why was he taken by the police? Papa usually handled any problems on the estate, especially those among his employees—unless Kurt had done something like stealing from someone else. Certainly, going for a horseback ride with her had not been a police matter. Mr. Brewster knew something that he had not told her. Maybe Tuppling would know. She would check with him. She knew Kurt's mother worked in the house. She would check that out, too.

Rachel was decidedly getting worried at Kurt's lateness when she heard footsteps on the front steps.

"Kurt dear," she cried and ran through the little hall to the door. He would be so hungry, she thought, but it would only take a few minutes to heat his food. With a smile on her face she opened the door, and the smile trembled and died as she saw the stable master. She looked at him inquiringly and waited for an explanation.

Mr. Brewster held his cap in his hands and she could smell brandy on his breath. He stood awkwardly, wishing someone else could be the harbinger of his news. He cleared his throat.

"Begging your pardon, It's about Kurt. I must tell ye the news."

Rachel reached out her hand to him. "Tell me what, Mr. Brewster? What has happened to my son? Is he hurt?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. Be easy on that score. It's all a

bit of a misunderstanding, I be thinkin'. It will be cleared up very shortly." He gave her a confident smile, hoping soon to be on his way.

"But where is he? And what is this misunderstanding you are talking of?"

"Well, Constable Higgins had to take him to his station for questioning. It seems there was an item or two that came up missing from Lord Jeffrey's study. As soon as the master returns I am confident that everything will be straightened out."

Rachel felt as though she were smothering. "I must go to him, Mr. Brewster. He is just a boy! Where is he?"

"Oh no, you stay right here. He'll get back to you. It would be a wrong thing for you to go to the prison. You must stay at home."

Rachel reached out to touch his arm. It was nearly full dark, and the lights from the street reflected the tears brimming in her eyes. "Please help us, Mr. Brewster."

"That I will, Mrs. Bolin," he said as he left. He rubbed his nose with the back of his sleeve.

Rachel watched him as he walked off into the darkness. There was a light in his office and he was silhouetted as he entered. She listened to the sound of horses hooves in the street and the iron rims of the wheels across the cobblestones. As she stood at the door, trying to decide how to meet this problem, she looked out over the lighter skies over the city which was just beyond her vision. There were thousands of people in vast blocks of buildings. Tonight Kurt was one of them—somewhere—just one boy among that throng of uncarving people.

She turned quickly to light the lamps, when a light tap on the door startled her. She swung it open and saw little Megan.

Instinctively Rachel reached out and took the child's hand in hers.

"Come in, my dear. What can I do for you?"

"Have you heard from Kurt, ma'am? You *do* know that Kurt was taken to the police station, Mrs. Bolin?"

"Yes, my dear, he has just been taken for questioning. But my boy has not done anything wrong. I am certain of that. Mr.

Brewster says that Kurt will most likely be home for supper tonight." She waved her hand at the cupboard and the simmering pot of food over the fire.

Megan's eyes came back to the older woman with concern, for she had talked to Tuppling. He had been firm in his statement that Kurt would be taken to prison. She stood up and patted the older woman on the shoulder. "My father will straighten this out. I will get word to him, and he will help us." She turned and went to the door.

Rachel stood up and reached for her shawl, "I will walk you home, child. You must not be out alone at night."

Megan looked up at her and smiled. "No one can catch me, Mrs. Bolin." She gave a little laugh and jumped down the steps to run into the darkness toward the big house. She had only a short distance when she stopped and called out, "Stay home, Mrs. Bolin. My father will take care of everything. Don't worry," and then she was gone.

Rachel picked up a lamp and took it closer to the portrait she was painting of Kurt and studied the likeness. There was still more to do, but it seemed as though he were smiling at her. And she had caught the look of his ancestors. Gently, she covered it, then sank into the chair by the table. Hopefully, he would be home soon.

Chapter Forty

Young Kurt Bolin sat rigidly in the constable's coach as the sounds of the busy London street pounded unfamiliarly in his ears and the clop-clop of the iron-shod hooves reminded him that every step took him further from home. He felt panic rising within him as he stared wild-eyed down at his manacled wrists. Anger swelled in his brain and the muscles of his arms and chest felt strong enough to batter through the chains and burst to freedom through the coach door. He could disappear into the thick crowd and gain his freedom, but first he must hear of the crime he was supposed to have committed.

He looked up and asked through teeth clenched against tears, "But what is my crime? You have said nothing except to ask if that is my jacket." Kurt pointed to the sack that was held in the constable's lap.

The policeman had his mind on his wife's watch that he had taken in for repairs, but now he was thinking something else as well, and it was making him feel uneasy. It was his job to deal with criminals every day, and some of them were extremely dangerous. In those cases he used the leg-irons as well as the wrist bracers. There were also the rings of steel in the floor of

the coach where an extra chain could be extended from the wrists, causing the prisoners to ride in a bent position, safe from escape.

He had felt no need to take these precautions with this boy who was only about fifteen and looked like a fine lad from a decent home. But he now saw this was no ordinary boy. The lad was clenching his fists, his arm muscles were straining against his shirt sleeves, and his thigh muscles put a strain against his trouser legs. Obviously, the boy was growing out of his clothes faster than his mother could supply them. He glanced into the boy's face, and he was met with a forthright look that was completely unfamiliar in his line of duty with the criminal elements of the city.

This boy's eyes drilled into his own with frank honesty and integrity as he waited for the answer to his question. This was certainly not the sly, belligerent, smirking, pitiful, and even pleading look that was commonplace in the boys he usually brought in.

"Lad, you have stolen the Lord Jeffrey's valuable little statue. We found it hidden away in your jacket." His words had a hollow ring to them even to himself.

The boy answered earnestly and quietly, "Never! Do you understand, sir? Never have I ever taken anything from Lord Jeffrey or any other man. I have served him honestly. Perhaps someone is trying to get me into trouble."

"You will have your chance to tell your story, lad."

A woman's trilling laughter caught their attention as she passed them riding in a pony phaeton. A yeoman was acting as her outrider, and two grooms rode behind. The woman was dressed in high fashion. She caught the desperation in Kurt's eyes, and then saw the iron cuffs on his wrist. She drew her companion's attention to the boy, with a suddenly sympathetic and saddened expression. As the coach started, she suddenly blew a kiss to him off her gloved hand before it carried him away into the traffic.

Kurt's eyes questioned the constable, who answered, "That was Miss Mary Robinson, the great actress, and in her role at the Royal Theatre she is playing Perdita. I am taking my wife there tonight."

Kurt could see that he was visibly excited about seeing her so closely.

The smell of low-hanging coal smoke hung in the air along with the stench from the open sewers. Kurt caught sight of a group of boys running and zigzagging through the crowds. One of the lads, more brash than the others, spotted Kurt in the familiar prison coach. He grabbed at the handle and the door-top, his eyes wild and face dirty. "Got'cha, did they, mate? Make a dash for it, chum. Ya'll never get outta their prisons once they get ya in." He leaped out of the way in time to avoid the lash of the coachman's whip, and Kurt watched him join his barefoot friends as they disappeared in the crowd.

The constable leaned from the coach window and yelled after the boy, "When we can make room in our prisons, we'll sweep you vermin off our streets and lock you up where you belong." He cleared his throat and spit into the street before he sat back, yelling to the driver above him, "Blockhead, use your bell and clear the traffic. I have more to do than sit here getting yelled at."

The driver took up the bell and by swinging it up and down, he alerted the heavy traffic to pull to the side. He touched his whip to the back of the horses and the carriage lurched forward as fists were raised and protests shouted. The angry red-faced driver clanged the bell again and shouted obscenities at those who were too slow in moving out of the way.

The street widened as they came in to the center of the city near Government House. Kurt had been here before with his Grandfather Roth who had explained about English law, and here he had seen a framed copy of the Magna Charta. A sudden pain like homesickness gripped his belly.

The driver reined in the horses and the coach pulled slowly through the great stone gates that led to the inner court, and then lined up alongside several other police carriages.

Constable Higgins walked Kurt up the dingy stone steps where a uniformed officer came to attention. Kurt glanced fearfully up at the gray stone two-story building, and it seemed that every one of the narrow staring windows had steel bars. In a panic he thought of the street urchin's call to him, *make a dash for it chum*, but there was no chance for that now with the

constable gripping his elbow, the manacles, and policemen everywhere. Reason won over panic, for he wanted to return home, and he knew well that he could not if he ran away now.

Kurt was taken to a small room off the hallway. There were five boys already there, all wearing iron cuffs and sprawled on the floor against the wall. He was led over to a desk officer, a big Irishman of about thirty, dark and stocky with a short neck and round head. His cheeks were reddened above his flowing mustache. "My name is Muldoon, constable," he said. He turned then to Kurt, "Sit there, boy, and do your time in ease," he pointed to the floor.

Kurt attempted to sit down, but with his hands manacled before him, it was awkward and he fell against a heavyset boy of about fifteen who growled impatiently at him, "Push off, now. This place is occupied."

Kurt was uneasy with the youth. He was not like him or the others. They were sly and secretive, and their bodies reeked of the filth of their clothes as their elbows rubbed against their bodies and their fingers scratched their thick matted hair to dislodge the digging vermin. He drew himself away from them as far as he could, for he knew that they were infested with fleas and lice. His aloofness drew surly looks from them. A big boy drew up his legs as though to scratch his ankle, drawing it as high as possible, then brought it down with force so that his boot caught Kurt on his shinbone. Immediately the lad grasped his ankle and yelled as though in pain, "He caught me wit' a boot, Owv!"

The Irish policeman swung around, his shoulders hunched and his jaw jutted aggressively in anger. While the boy moaned and rolled back and forth in apparent pain, Kurt tried to explain what had happened. All the other boys joined the accusations against Kurt and defended their friend and leader. "It was Joxer wot got 'urt, cap'n. On me mother's grave, I swear it."

As the officer reached down and grasped Kurt's chain between his hands to jerk him to his feet the cuffs cut cruelly into his wrists. "We keep things orderly here, boy, as you will soon find out. Now you sit over there, and I'll be wantin' no more trouble with ye."

Kurt gripped his hands together to still the pain in his wrists. He could feel the tears of frustration rising, but willed them sternly away as he saw the boys smirking in eager enjoyment of his discomfort. Their eyes darted from one another in veiled excitement at their little successful byplay.

Constable Higgins stood before Judge Kettering's bench as the jurist concluded his case. "Lord Jeffrey's bronze statue was found rolled up in the boy's jacket and hidden in a pile of hay near the stables where he works. The boy had earlier been in the study where the statue was kept. Tuppling, a servant, found flakes of hay and manure after the boy was there and also after the statue was found missing. The boy was also seen riding one of his Lordship's personal horses without permission. After all, he is just a stable boy, cleaning stalls and yards."

"Does his Lordship know of this attempted theft?" Judge Kettering asked, fingering his lower lip.

"No sir, it is felt that everything should be settled without giving his Lordship concern with this problem, especially as the piece has been recovered and the culprit caught and brought to justice."

"Bring the boy before me. I will talk to him," Mr. Kettering directed.

Constable Higgins opened the door and pointed his finger at Kurt, "Bring that red-headed lad in with you."

"Aye, and it's about time. The lad's a troublemaker."

Kurt got silently to his feet, for he didn't want to be pulled up as he had been before. He walked as proudly as he could, the words of his grandfather singing in his ears, *Always turn to yourself, build your own world, and you will find comfort and courage therein*. Now he walked sturdily forward, hoping that they would soon take off the shackles from his wrists. Surely this mistake would be cleared up now and he would be able to go back to his work. No doubt he would have to work longer hours to make up for this loss of time, but that was no worry. He would just be glad to get back to the clean stable air again.

Kettering was a man of about forty years, square-jawed,

with heavy features and a vivid scar under his left eye. He looked coldly now at Kurt who gave him an honest straightforward smile. The man bent his head and studied the report and then he looked up at the Irish desk officer. "What was the disturbance out there, Muldoon?"

The Irishman shrugged his shoulders, "The lad, here, struck one of the other boys."

Kurt raised his manacled hands to protest and the judge looked at him sternly, "You will have your chance to speak, laddie, but for now you just answer my questions. You are Jewish, are you not?"

"Yes, sir," Kurt stood straighter.

"Have you become a citizen of our country?"

"No sir, it would mean giving—" his voice died away.

Kettering wrote a few sentences on the report before him, then he turned to the officer at the door. "Send the Jew with the other boys to Bridewell. We have no room here for more prisoners."

Constable Higgins tried to hide his surprise. He had expected that Kurt would remain here at the city gaol where he could have a hearing and then return to his home within a short time. His instincts told him that there would be a full investigation of this matter, and if the boy was innocent. . . . His face paled at the picture of himself being questioned in the docks. Certainly the case against the boy was incomplete, and the lad was staunch in asserting his innocence. Perhaps he should have listened more carefully, and investigated more. His attention came back to the judge.

"The wagon will soon be leaving for Bridewell. Put this young Jew into a cell until then." Kettering rose from his desk and put the report folder into the filing cabinet behind him. "I'll need to keep his jacket for the time being."

Kurt was taken back into a holding area where drunks, vagrants, and petty thieves were crowded together. Higgins watched him until the door closed, then walked outside to his driver.

"Back to Lord Jeffrey's and make it smart. Use the bell if you have to, but get there fast," he barked. He settled back against the soft leather seat. This arrest was somehow not to his liking. Perhaps he should not have in such a hurry to get

the case closed. Still, the man Tuppling had been insistent that it be settled before Lord Jeffrey returned.

For the first time Kurt noticed his gnawing hunger. The stable hands would have already been fed supper. He glanced at the other inmates to see if he could get a clue as to whether they had already eaten. A very thin elderly man with white hair and beard sat on the floor, and Kurt squatted down before him.

"Have you eaten?" he asked.

"Je parle non Anglais," the man replied. Kurt knew that French was spoken in parts of London, and that many refugees had never learned English. He put his hand on the old man's shoulder and spoke gently to him, "Je parle francais."

Kurt's grandfather had taught him that language as well as Latin and Greek, and had taken him to the French Quarter, where he had practised by talking with the refugees living there.

Now the man gave Kurt a tentative smile and answered his question, "Lad, we have but two meals a day. We had the first one long ago. The next will be after midday." He patted his stomach, "Though I must say that it is difficult to eat the food, and then to keep it down. I have the trouble here." He patted his stomach. They were shortly joined by two younger men who also only spoke French.

Kurt asked if they were brothers, and they nodded adding that the older man was their father. He liked these Frenchmen, and was surprised that they were here, jailed like criminals. They saw the question in his eyes.

"We could not pay the rent to our landlord, so—we are prisoners until we can pay the debt. We cannot speak the anglais, so we could not find the work. We can not earn while we are in here, so perhaps we shall not get out, for we cannot pay."

"In the prison for your debts? But how can anyone pay while they cannot earn?" Kurt had heard that such a thing could happen, but he had never truly given it much thought. "What will happen if you cannot pay?"

"Asile des pauperes . . ." the old man stated. Kurt had heard of the workhouse, and he was appalled.

"And what is your offense, my son?"

As Kurt explained, his passion rose at the injustice of his arrest, and he was incensed that these men, and probably others like them, were here and could not help themselves either.

The old man motioned Kurt to sit down and his two sons placed themselves so that they could shield him from inquisitive eyes. One took off his shoe, raised the inner sole and removed a thin wire. Within a few minutes the boy's chain had been removed.

"Rest your hands, child. When the time comes, we will put them back on you. Your wrists are cut and if they are left so tight, your hands will swell. Guards sometimes leave them on for days.

Kurt was excited with this sense of freedom and he rubbed his wrists to restore the circulation. "Will you teach me to pick and open locks?" he asked eagerly.

"These are but simple ones, *mon fils*, and you can learn in a few minutes. It takes much practise to open the more complicated ones."

The four sat in a close circle and taught Kurt as they talked. "We are the Mollineaux family—I am Jean, and these are my two sons Emile and Charles."

"I am Kurt Bolin, *mes ami*." Kurt found that his fear of imprisonment and confinement had subtly gone. Of course he wanted to go home, but he was becoming resigned to this short stay. His young eager mind was absorbing these experiences. Although the floor was cold and the stench terrible, the place was made bearable by the friendship of these men.

A loud rattle of metal bowls sounded from the far end of the corridor. "It is our supper," Jean explained.

As Kurt placed his bowl in readiness to eat, he felt nausea rise in his throat. He understood now why the old man's stomach gave him trouble. He remembered how he had complained of his mother's fish stew, and he wished that he might trade this foul concoction for any of her food. He was about to set the bowl down when Charles cautioned him.

"It will be a long time to your next meal, boy. Eat it all. See? We hold the nose." He watched Kurt for a moment. "Oui, that is the way. Eat it all, for it is little enough." Charles saw the

guard coming towards their cell. "Hurry, it will mean trouble if the guards find you without your shackles." Swiftly he fitted them back, though more loosely, onto Kurt's wrists.

A husky policeman unlocked the door and motioned Kurt to follow him. He gave his friends a lift of his shackled hands and a farewell grin.

Chapter Forty-One

Kurt followed the guard into Judge Kettering's office. There was an open window here, and he filled his lungs several times, trying to rid himself of the foul air of the cell block. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, for the taste of the putrid food was still in his mouth. Boys were lined up against the wall along with three middle-aged men in leg and wrist chains.

"Attention!" bawled a sergeant. "Now, lads, you are going to Bridewell Prison where you will stand before a justice of the peace. He will hear the evidence against you. Now have your answers ready in your defense, if you have any. But for now," and here he emphasized his words by smacking his palm with his nightstick, "and from this second on, your behavior will have a bearing on the justice's decision as to judgement and sentencing. Your future will be decided by him."

As Kurt followed the other prisoners out and climbed into the crowded jail coach, he felt repelled by the foul smell of his fellows. He longed for the sweet-smelling barns of Lord Jeffrey. As he settled down beside the others, he felt his skin begin to itch with the vermin that were finding their way onto him. In such tight quarters, he couldn't even scratch,

though he was seated next to a window. The outriding guard rode close enough that as his mount snorted, flecks of foam fell on Kurt's arm. The boy looked wistfully at the horse, wishing he could somehow climb onto the saddle and ride free of this situation.

A man sitting next to Kurt shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position. Kurt looked at him and grinned in wry sympathy. He was extremely thin, with a long face and sad eyes under heavy brows. He wore a wool cap that rested on enormous ears. His hands looked narrow enough to slip out of the cuffs. Kurt caught a sparkle of amusement in his eyes. He certainly didn't look like a criminal. What could the fellow have done?

He gave Kurt a nudge with his bony elbow and whispered in his ear, "I am Elijah Peck. You look like a lad from the country." He smiled as Kurt nodded, "I catch the smell of a gentleman's stables, and clean well-cared-for horses. I'm a country man myself. This stinking prison soon kills that fresh aroma."

Kurt saw that the man was dressed in leather britches, a neat cotton shirt, and hand-crafted boots similar to the ones that Mr. Brewster wore. He answered courteously. "My name is Kurt Bolin, and I work in Lord Jeffrey's stables. I am falsely accused of stealing from him."

The man's eyes were warm with understanding. "Aye, lad, I can believe you. I should be able to say the same for myself. You've never been to Bridewell before, have ye? No, I didn't think so. Well, I have, so I can tell ye a little about it." He pointed with a clawlike finger. "Ye can see that we're heading for the river. See ye? You can see the tower now."

Kurt saw the Tower of London lit up against the last rays of the setting sun. Peck continued, "This old castle was much used by our good King Henry VIII. Later, because it fronted the river, it became too noisy for the king and his guests, so he gave it to the city. They used to train boys here, but now they've turned it into a workshop for both men and women to pay off their debts, and also for us prisoners. A few years back this whole area was the worst in London. It was refuge for every kind of criminal."

"No talking!" bawled the guard.

Kurt strained to see the old castle as they left the waterfront road and swung around toward the entrance to the police court. They passed warehouses, and he could see armed men standing guard against the pleadings of hundreds of city dwellers who were obviously starving.

The coach halted and the sergeant briskly moved his prisoners into a lineup. "All right, lad," he ordered Kurt, "look sharp. No lagging and no talking. Now follow me," he shouted.

Policemen were stationed at the doorway, and other coaches were also arriving, many from outlying districts. Kurt watched as guards closed the big iron entry gates—any chance of escape was now out of the question. He was not overly concerned, however, for he was confident that when the justice heard his story, he would be able to end this ordeal. He might even reach home before bedtime, and could almost see his mother's eyebrows go up if he tried to come into her house with these vermin crawling on him!

As Kurt was crowded into a narrow corridor, his mind faced stark and brutal reality. Some of the prisoners had leg-irons as well as the iron bracelets and chains, and many in the group were very young. These were the boys that his grandfather had told him about. "They are bewildered little souls," he had said, "herded into pens, exploited by unfeeling and greedy men, living in ugly conditions, suffocatingly hot in summer and freezing in winter. The sweatshops are filled with them at starvation wages, with the dreary and endless toil where hope withers and dies."

He looked along the long corridor filled with men and children in shackles of one kind or another. Everyone seemed to be moving toward a large room at the end of the hallway. When Kurt got there, he could see benches were placed against a wall. The prisoners were directed to sit down and wait. A raised platform held a table and a few straight-backed chairs. A portrait of King George III was on the wall and a Union Jack flag was in a standard to one side of the picture. Barred windows were open, and guards were stationed at the doors and between the benches. The prisoners sat silently, waiting for the justice of the peace to come. Kurt stared silently around him, caught up by the sense

of apprehension and fear that permeated the room. Then he caught the eye of Elijah Peck, who gave him a guarded wink.

Justice Chesterton and one of the prosecutors were comfortably seated in the private chambers. They had been notified that the court was ready at their convenience.

"Seventeen cases are too many for a two-hour session," said Mr. Chesterton. He was nearing sixty and had retired two years ago, but had been persuaded to come back to relieve the tremendous burdens of the bench. He rose and began to put on his powdered wig. "It's not easy to have these men and boys stand before me and know that even if their crime is small, or even if they are innocent, I must not put them back on the streets until conditions get better. Somehow we must send them out of England, for we are out of room—in the cities and in the prisons." He sighed and turned to the door, followed by a silent prosecutor.

The two men stepped into the courtroom as the bailiff called the court to order. The justice impatiently took his place under the picture of the king, and the prosecutor sat down beside him.

The Justice looked out over the crowded room and said sternly, "I dislike any difficulty or scenes, and it will go hard with anyone causing a disturbance."

Kurt was restless and on the edge of his seat, ready to step forward. Glancing through the window near him, he could only see blackness, for it was getting late. Rather than spend another minute here, he would run home in the dark, he thought. He could at least be there by morning. He was disappointed when it was whispered that there were several boys petitioning for discharge, and he sat back and became interested as the court heard these cases. Except for one boy whose father appeared for him, all were enlisted in the Royal Navy.

"Elijah Peck," the clerk called. Elijah walked forward with a stride like a cat, moving with the ease of a woodsman.

A court lawyer stood beside him, announcing that he was the prosecutor. "Elijah Peck has been apprehended for poaching on the king's lands. It has been known for some time that he is

a trespasser. We have a witness, Your Honor, who will testify that a fortnight ago he came upon the accused by accident, and the man was in the process of butchering a stag."

The justice gave the accused a flinty look. "What have you to say for yourself, Elijah Peck?"

"I am guilty as charged, Your Honor."

"Are you aware of the seriousness of your crime? I could sentence you to the gallows."

Kurt was stunned with disbelief, and he noticed that Elijah had visibly paled.

"Your Honor, I have served my country in the Royal Navy, and I have served it well."

The judge gave him a nod of approval. "I see. Well my good fellow, you leave me little choice. Your service stands you in good stead, but the choice seems to be the gallows or possibly the East India Company—if they would sign you on, since you are a fighting man."

A well-dressed man came forward from the witness bench. He was obviously at ease in the courtroom and friendly with the prosecutor.

"Your Honor," he said "I will sign this man on for the company. He must, of course, agree to four years service."

It appeared that the case was complete and Elijah was beckoned by the guard to follow him, but he stayed at attention before the justice. He explained, "Your Honor, a transportation ship leaves at midnight on the tide, bound for the colonies in Australia. I, sir . . . with your most gracious approval . . . would choose this punishment."

The justice sucked in his breath. The East India Company representative dropped his hands and stared in amazement. There was a hushed silence in the courtroom, for everyone knew about these expeditions that went across the world with convicts. There were whips to flog them, often up to a thousand lashes, and ducking boxes suspended from the ship's yardarms. Men were repeatedly hauled in and out of water, sometimes drowning. These ships hauled tools to build prisons and madhouses in Australia, a barren continent of over three million square miles. Only a few wandering aboriginal natives and their dingo dogs lived there. It was a land that had never been lived in—a land of no return. Kurt had heard it said that

"The cuckoo sings at midnight, and the man in the moon is upside down." Now the hair stood up on the back of his neck as he watched Elijah closely, trying to understand the meaning of his request.

The justice stared hard into the prisoner's eyes looking for signs of madness. Finally, he leaned back satisfied and said to the guard, "So be it!" Kurt watched the back of his friend as he disappeared through the door.

When Kurt's attention came back to the bench, he saw four lads were lined up together. The prosecutor was reviewing the charges against them. They were the boys who had earlier laughed at his discomfort.

At last the justice spoke. "I will give these three children another chance . . . let them be confined for two months and be well-whipped." He motioned for the younger boys to be led away, leaving Joxer, their leader, standing alone and sweating, the picture of humility. "But you, young blockhead, have been before this court before, and now you have been apprehended as a pickpocket. How do you plead?"

Joxer could see his victim waiting to testify, and he was aware of the list of offenses on record. "I am at the mercy of the court, yer honor, but I would like to say that I love my king and country, and if I did not have me mother and family to support, I would not have come by such hard times."

Kurt could not see Joxer's face, but he saw his arm move as though to wipe away a tear. The justice's interest had been won.

"Does your mother work?" the boy was asked.

"Oh, yes, yer honor. Before me father left us we traveled with a puppet show. Since then my little sisters sells matches and mama hawks old clothes and her health is bad."

The prosecutor spoke up impatiently, "Your Honor, this prisoner gave the same story before, and we cannot verify it. He gave us the place on Turtle Street as his home, and it never existed. He left his master without a proper discharge. His crimes continually become more serious, and other young boys are now following him in his ways. Your Honor, pickpocketing is punishable by death . . ."

The justice held up his hand. "I am aware of the legal punishments, counselor." He turned his gaze back to the boy.

"You are fifteen years old and you appear to have come before your parish judge so often it has become a habit, and now you are a menace to society. I'd best deal with you severely."

"Your Honor, could I go with the East India Company?"

Justice Chesterton looked inquiringly at the company representative who shook his head.

"The Royal Navy?" pleaded the boy.

The justice appeared saddened as he motioned to the guard, "It appears that Elijah Peck will have company in Australia."

Joxer dropped to his knees, and with genuine tears streaming down his face, he turned terror stricken eyes up to the bench. The justice motioned the guard to drag the boy away.

Kurt's attention was so engrossed in this incident that his name had to be called a second time. He rose and walked quickly before the justice.

Mr. Kettering came forward. "Your Honor, I am here as a witness, for the arresting officer is on another important matter for the crown."

Kurt turned and looked at him with dazed eyes, and he wondered how being at the theater to see Miss Mary Robinson could be an important matter for the king. His eyes came back to the justice when he spoke.

"Thank you. You may take your seat. I will call you if you are needed." He looked over the desk at the boy before him. The boy was a Jew even though the record had omitted that fact. The shock of red hair was unusual, but the other features were classic. He was familiar with the problems of these people, for some sixteen thousand had been expelled from England and all of their properties confiscated. The justice sighed, for now the Jewish population was growing again. He knew them to be good tradesmen, but he doubted that they would ever be good countrymen and give their whole loyalty to England.

Kurt stood up as straight as he could. His chained hands hung down in front of him. He knew that he was dirty and unkempt, and he felt embarrassed to be tried as a criminal. It took considerable self-control to keep from bursting out with violent protestations of his innocence. The air was humid and hot, and the smell coming from the prisoners was extremely offensive. Kurt watched as Mr. Chesterton poured a few

drops of vinegar on his handkerchief and held it to his nose. As the justice turned to speak with the prosecutor, he could hear the name of Lord Jeffrey. Somehow, Kurt felt his confidence slipping away.

"You appear older than the fifteen years of age that you claim here."

"Yes sir, I am sixteen today."

"You are a Jew?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Do you recognize the man in the portrait?" The justice motioned to the painting on the wall behind him.

"Yes, Your Honor. It is George the Third, King of England."

"Do you honor the king?"

"Yes, Your Honor, I honor our king and country."

"Would you fight for king and country?"

Kurt wondered what this was leading to. Could it be the Royal Navy? At sixteen he'd be a slave in a galley. But he must answer. "Yes, Your Honor, like my father before me, I would fight for our country."

"You say 'our country'. Are you then a citizen of England?"

"Not in actual fact, Your Honor, for I have not been able to pay the fee to make my declaration, but in spirit, I am loyal to England."

"Are you willing to comply with the other requirement to become a citizen?"

There was hardly a person in the room so ignorant that he had not been taught by rote the catechism of the Church of England, and Kurt's answer faltered.

"Answer, boy. Who are the wicked that go to hell at death? Do you believe that, as a Jew, if you refuse Christ you will go to hell?" The tone of the justice's voice had taken on a sound of condemnation like that of others who put the question before hundreds of thousands of Jewish people in every country.

Kurt drew himself up and stood with dignity. He realized, almost with bewilderment, that he was actually being tried as a Jew, as a criminal. Softly he answered. "I believe in God. However I cannot accept communion in the Church of England."

The silence in the room did not break into hooting or ribald

yells; it grew into a snarling sound, like a wild beast. Everyone, including the justice, the prosecutor, and those in the room, joined in united indignation. The red-haired boy stood at that moment like the Jew who had stood before Pilate; perhaps innocent but convicted.

The bailiff hammered for attention and after a few moments Kurt was asked, "Do you have the same loyalty to Lord Jeffrey as you do the king? I mean with the same reservations."

"I have no reservations, Your Honor." The boy's face was covered by a sheen of sweat born as he tried to control his fear.

"We have witnesses who testify that you stole from him." He waved a paper at Kurt. "This also states that you took liberties by riding his horses without his knowledge or consent. You were a troublemaker, in the stables, caused a disturbance in the police station and disobeyed the sergeant on the way to this court." He laid the paper back on his desk, folded his hands together before him, and leaned forward to hold Kurt's eyes with his own. "You reside here in England, but you will not concede to the decrees of its king. Lord Jeffrey has sheltered you, and you steal from him and commit various and sundry acts of misconduct. Our land is filled with those who honorably need work. We lack employment for our own subjects . . . of which you refuse to become one! I would be delinquent in my trust if I allowed you to take up your former place and work again."

He looked at his counselor, and then around the room for a moment. There was full agreement with his statement.

He motioned to the guard. "There will be one more passenger for the vessel leaving on the outgoing tide at midnight. Next prisoner, bailiff."

Chapter Forty-Two

The guard took a firm hold on Kurt's arm, and as he was led down the corridor, an inner voice thundered in his brain, *make a dash—escape—escape*. Since early morning, each step had taken him closer, like a dumb sheep to slaughter. His mind signaled his young muscles to action, and he felt impelled to fight this fate thrust upon him. His blood was that of the men and women who had survived over four thousand years in a hostile brutal world. Kurt was endowed with the best of their courage and strength, and now he knew that he must have the intelligence and the skill to free himself or face an intolerable future.

However, not only was he endowed with strength, he had already learned the need for caution. It was not fear. It was knowing there was a right time for action. His great-great-grandfather Kurtsev Bolinski had killed a bear with cunning as well as strength. Kurt was ready, but now was not the right time. But with true intuition, he knew that his escape would come before the night was over.

As his guard shoved him into a cellblock, he stepped on the wet floor where barefooted prisoners were using strong lye

soap to wash and scrub away the filth left by their fellows. The policeman poked Kurt with his nightstick and growled, "Get along faster, mate." He moved along the wall toward a group of convicts standing in the courtyard. Fog crept up from the river and it wasn't until Kurt had closed up the line that he felt, rather than saw, the leg-iron as it was snapped onto his ankles. The men were all chained together!

Under the strident commands of the guards, the men lurched forward awkwardly. The gruff cadence of "left, right, left, right" fell on ears dulled by panic and sullen anger. The iron bands cut into the ankles of those out of step and caused others to trip and fall to the ground. Angry guards with raised fists walked up and down the line, jerking men to their feet, shoving, and shouting continuously. Twenty minutes later, the group of convicts reached the wharf. With a semblance of order, they marched across the wet planks, their chains dragging with a muffled clanging, their bootheels the only clear sound in the still night. The stars were mere pinpoints of light in the rising mist.

Kurt's right hand was on the shoulder of the man in front of him, and this told him when they began to descend stairs. His other hand found a railing, and he soon saw an outline of long boats loaded with men. They were tied up alongside a lower landing, and the oar shafts were upended like masts. One guard was busy removing leg-irons and another shoved the men into an overcrowded boat.

Kurt was the last aboard, and he sat behind an oarsman while guards were shouting "shoveoff." He reached for his lockpick, for now he must escape. The boats were pushed out into the river current, and the oarsmen lowered their oars as the coxswain barked out the strokes.

The elderly man next to him broke out in a fit of coughing. Kurt straightened up and glanced at him. He was huddled into his jacket, clutching it with talonlike fingers. His cap was pulled over his forehead. While Kurt could not see his eyes, his hawklike nose and small pointed chin were pronounced. Kurt became aware that the guard stood above him on a plank set down in the center of the boat. He carried a whip curled up in his hand and walked slowly with a catlike tread. As he passed going toward the bow, the man stopped his coughing, and then

Kurt heard a soft chuckle. Kurt heard a whisper say, "Got to make the bloody guards think I'm sick. That'll keep me off the work gangs." The man's breath was foul, and Kurt could not help an involuntary withdrawal. He sensed a stir of anger.

Kurt gazed across the river. There he could see the old prison hulks faintly silhouetted against the dark sky. He stared at them in awe, for his grandfather had told him that the prisons were so crowded that these old vessels were anchored permanently and converted into housing for convicts. They were known as pestholes, because for each boatload of new prisoners, as many were taken from the ship wrapped in their shrouds.

Kurt leaned over as though trying to sleep and soon had both wrist shackles loose. He was free! He hid the cuff and chain under his feet as the guard walked toward him. Now he could make a dash for freedom—maybe just roll over the side when the coast was clear. The boat was deep in the water. Overloading had brought her dangerously close to the water level.

The old man started his coughing again, but now Kurt knew it was fake, and a sign that the guard was close. He waited breathlessly for him to pass. Young Bolin had no fear of the water. Swimming came naturally to him, and after a long day at the stables, he had enjoyed slicing through the water.

Kurt's mind came back to the problem before him. He had no idea where he would come ashore, but he knew that he must find a place to hide until daylight. He wished that Elijah Peck was with him, for his new friend knew the country well and could find a safe place to hide.

The coughing beside him started again. That meant the guard would soon pass by with his back to them. His muscles tightened as he watched the policeman walk away. The tide would turn at midnight, and all the convicts would be loaded . . . except me, Kurt thought grimly.

He rose to his feet with a fluid motion and put one foot on the seat preparing to roll over into the water. Suddenly he felt the old man beside him clutch his belt, jerk him back and in a high screeching voice yell, "Man going overboard!"

There was an immediate stir of excitement. One guard came running down the plank and another came from the stern with his gun leveled.

Kurt was trying to rip loose the clawlike hands that held his belt when the boat struck a barge hidden by the fog. The blow of the collision caved in the side of the longboat and it fell on its side. Water rushed in as guards and convicts were thrown into the turgid river. The convicts, their hands fastened together with chains, screamed in panic, for if one died, it would happen to them all.

Two wooden prison boats came toward them rapidly. But Kurt was free to race for the shore. Then he saw Elijah Peck, and knew something was wrong! Perhaps he'd been hit on the head—he needed aid. Kurt reached him, throwing his arms across the drowning man's shoulders and over his chest. Taking a firm grip of his chin, he kept Elijah's head above water, letting the current take them downstream. Perhaps he could take the unconscious man to shore—but Elijah Peck was chained to another floundering man!

Suddenly the rescue vessel was virtually upon them. Rough hands grabbed him, and both Kurt and Elijah were pulled aboard. The other survivors were forced onto the longboats too.

A murmuring among the men called Kurt's attention to a large ship silhouetted against the sky. As they passed under the bow, Kurt saw the figurehead of a maiden looking out to sea and blowing on a horn. He noticed that the end of the wooden horn had been broken off. The hull was painted black with a yellow stripe. As they neared the swinging rope ladder, a guard started down among the men, removing chains. Kurt felt a sense of alarm. If he was caught with his wrist cuffs off, there would be trouble. As the longboat was made fast, Kurt placed himself among the prisoners who had already had their cuffs removed, and prepared to climb the ladder. Guards were shouting and cursing as Kurt climbed over the side onto the deck, where he was grabbed and herded with the other convicts into the hold below. Orders were bellowed and he could feel the motion of the vessel as it caught the outgoing tide—on its way to Australia.

Constable Higgins indulged himself in the luxury of his Sunday morning. By habit he had awakened early, but he stretched out between his clean sheets and put his hands behind

his head, shut his eyes, and recaptured the vision of Mary Robinson. What a great actress she was, and how the audience thrilled to her performance. Last night's performance had been a sellout, and she had received a standing ovation. A smile touched his lips as he recalled how close he had been to her when their coaches had almost touched, and she had thrown him a kiss. He stretched again, then peeked from the corner of his eyes at his wife as though she might become aware of his secret romancing.

She was facing away from him, lying on her side, her well-shaped hips provocatively humped under the covers. It stirred him, and he turned on his side and slowly brought his toes up under her foot. He wriggled his toe and she stirred slightly and gave the sigh of one deep in slumber. He moved himself against her, and again came the sigh, but this time there was weariness. He knew that she was pretending sleep, that in the early morning her desire was for sleep, not him. He smiled to himself, for he was sure of his conquest, and he put his arm across her and gently drew her to him.

There was a discreet tap at the door. He lay perfectly still, outraged at this disturbance. His wife raised herself up on her elbow. When the tap was repeated, a little more insistently now, it provoked his anger, and he sat up in bed and shouted. "Yes?"

The muffled voice of their servant girl came through the door. "There is a very important message for you sir—from Lord Jeffrey."

Dash it, this meant trouble, he thought. He put on his slippers and robe and opened the door with a yearning glance back at his wife.

"Hurry back, George," she said, laughing, as she snuggled back under the covers.

He ran down the stairs with the maid close behind him, muttering her apologies. Tuppling was waiting with hat in hand and an anxious look on his usually placid face.

"Sorry, sir, but his Lordship wishes to speak with you. I have a carriage waiting." There was a look of desperation in his eyes. "His Lordship requests that you bring the lad back with you."

Constable Higgins stopped in mid-stride. He had a feeling

that he had been belted between the shoulder blades. It was but a few minutes later that he was riding in the luxurious phaeton behind the fast trotters belonging to his Lordship. The driver had his directions, and expertly guided his four-in-hand through the main gates of the prison and pulled them gently to a halt.

Constable Higgins jumped out and went rapidly through the door to the booking office. "I'm here to pick up the boy, Kurt Bolin, that I left with you yesterday. You know, the red-headed lad."

"Oh, yes, sor," replied the desk officer. "But you'll be havin' to see the sergeant, and bein' it's Sunday, he's off. Come back tomorrow, Sor."

"No, I'll have the boy today."

"No? Well, I'll see what I can do." He moved out and led the way to the cellblock. Guards came to attention and spread out to their stations.

"We're lookin' for a lad with red hair." He turned back to Higgins. "What did ye be sayin' his name was?"

"Kurt Bolin."

A guard pointed to the cell that Kurt had been in. "I believe a red-headed Jew lad was in there for a short time."

The constable strode to the cage hoping to find Kurt still there. His eyes fell upon an old man crouching on the floor. "You there," he demanded, "Where did the boy go that was here?"

"Non comprende."

"What about you,?" he asked a younger man. "Was a red-haired boy here?"

The man rose to his feet and with his outstretched hand, he pointed to the door.

"Where did he go?"

The fellow shrugged his shoulders.

The constable's face was red with anger and frustration and he strode away with Tuppling and the Irish officer close behind. In the outer office, he turned and demanded between set teeth, "Where does Judge Kettering live?"

The officer mopped his sweating face with a handkerchief. "I could send for him," he offered.

"Send be damned. You will take me there right now." The two men followed the constable, hurrying to keep up with him.

Mr. Kettering looked patiently at his three children dancing around his legs. He glanced at his wife. "Hurry, me darling, and put things into the basket, or these young ones will pull me apart with this delay."

She answered with a smile, "They have waited a long time for this day at the park, and a few more minutes won't hurt them." The older boy pulled at her arm and pointed toward the street. The laugh left the officer's face as he saw his desk guard hurrying to his door. Was it a riot, a prison break? His mind raced for a reason why the officer was coming to his home on Sunday.

"It's the constable, sir. He has come for one of your prisoners."

"Where is the boy, Kurt Bolin?" Higgins asked abruptly.

"At Bridewell Prison."

"Let's go get him. Lord Jeffrey wants to see him immediately."

Megan's face was flushed with excitement as she told Rachel of her ride last night. At last she added, "But best of all, father has sent Tuppling to bring Humpty-Dumpty home again."

They both broke into happy laughter, and Rachel brushed away the tears of relief, as she turned to remove the Sabbath candles from the table.

"The tea will be ready in a few minutes, dear," she said as she took out cups and saucers. She'd had a sleepless night, and her father had sat with her until daybreak. Now he was sleeping, and she wondered if she should waken him to tell him of the good news. He had been so shattered with the news of Kurt's arrest, and she had watched him almost shrink before her eyes. He'd seen too much trouble in his lifetime, she thought with a sigh. Perhaps she'd better let him rest.

Rachel turned to look at the child Megan. Certainly she was older than her years. Perhaps the freedom she had had without a mother had made her more capable and independent. She could see that this imperious little girl would turn into a magnificently beautiful woman in the next few years.

At last she brought the teapot, and as Megan came to sit with her their eyes met, and Rachel held her hand out to the young girl. Their age difference was bridged at this moment, and an understanding became fused into a mutual need.

A door opened and Grandfather Roth came blinking into the room. "I must have overslept. I see that we have company." He gave Megan a smile.

When Megan told him the news, he asked, "And my grandson will soon be home?" At her nod, he gave the surprised girl a hug.

It was a new experience for Megan. She remembered her mother's embrace when she was a little girl, but never her father, never except that once . . . just last night when she had rushed into his arms. He had held her close then. But not this old man with his long hair and beard. She would have thought that she would never let him touch her, but he gave her a feeling of kindness and sincerity. His gentleness had awakened in her an enjoyment of such love and affection. Shyly she smiled at him.

"Come," said Rachel, and her eyes were bright with anticipation and happiness, "we must drink our tea before it cools."

"Oh, I am watching for Kurt. I want to be the very first to see him."

"It will be some time yet before they can possibly return," said Rachel. "We'll put our chairs on the porch, and then we can all watch."

Grandfather Roth insisted on hearing every detail of his grandson's trouble and Rachel savoured every word of Lord Jeffrey's confidence in Kurt's innocence.

"And what did your father say after you told him of the arrest, child?" the old gentleman asked.

Megan stood with her feet spread and imitated her father. "Rubbish! Utter nonsense! I pride myself on reading character, and the boy could not do such a thing. It must have been the jockey." Megan paused and then added, "And those were his very words. Then he sent Tuppling to bring Kurt home."

Now Rachel rose, "I must look to supper, so keep a sharp lookout and call me. I don't want Kurt to have a burnt meal on his first night home."

As she stood up, Megan called, "He's coming! He's coming!" Then she ran to the center of the road yelling, "Humpty-Dumpty is coming home."

Rachel hurriedly followed her as the driver of the coach strained back on the reins to stop the restive horses. The girl climbed up to talk to the man. Rachel's heart dropped in a convulsing fear as Megan turned back and held her hand out, her face pale.

"Oh Rachel, he's not here. They say he's on his way to Australia—transported to the penal colonies."

Rachel stared at her for a long agonizing moment, and then she slowly crumpled to the road unconscious.

Chapter Forty-Three

As the ship's bell sounded, the first mate, J.P. Hawksbury, stepped into the captain's quarters, and with a curt nod, proceeded to sit down at the desk. He opened the logbook and began to write, for this was but one of his many duties.

Captain Alfred Teague resented the intrusion, and he glared at the broad back of his mate. He had been reminiscing, wondering if he should have stayed with the law instead of going to sea. There was one thing for sure, he would have made a better success of his marriage. Shafts of sunlight streamed through his starboard window and reflected on the gilt letters of the motto of his wartime Commander, Lord Nelson. He idly watched the beam of light as it moved up and down with the easy roll of the ship, and he read the lettering England expects that every man will do his duty. Oh, it had been a glorious moment to stand alongside the commander in the heat of battle. And he had been one of the first at his side when Lord Nelson had been hit with the sniper's bullet that had claimed his life.

The mate turned and reported, "Seventy-seven convicts on board, sir."

The captain didn't answer, but his thoughts were bitter as he paced the cabin. Deserters and convicts—the scum of the earth, he thought with contempt. The lowest forms of human life. This command of a rotting vessel filled with convicts was a bitter one. He sighed. At least he was serving the crown by ridding England's shores of this vermin. He looked up with annoyance as the steward, Alfred P. Collins, came in bearing a tray.

The first mate finished his report and withdrew without a word. As he stepped out onto the deck, the brisk wind was on the beam, and the deck was slanted to port. His keen eye took in every detail of the ship, and was far from satisfied. "Mr. Malcolm," he called out to the second mate.

Vince Malcolm had been working with the crew but came running in response to the stern call. The sailors smiled behind his back for he was considered an officers' waiter. Out of breath, he came to attention.

Mr. Hawksbury pointed to the slack in the spankers and gave him a hard stare.

"Sorry, sir. I'll attend to it at once," Mr. Malcolm said as he moved quickly away muttering obscenities under his breath. He had many problems, not all to do with his duties aboard the *Determined*. A justice of the peace had given him the option of signing on again or going to prison. Now he walked past a squad of marines who were practicing drill. Their sergeant was barking out orders. What a trip this was going to be: seventy-seven convicts, ten of them women, plus the marines as well as the crew.

As he strode over the gratings that ventilated the convict quarters below, the human stench assailed his nostrils. He must get a crew working on cleanup at once. In a few days he would find men among the convicts that could be pressed into that foul duty. However, for now, the ship's own men must handle it.

Kurt spent a cold, miserable night. It had been too crowded in his cell to lie down, and he'd leaned against the bodies around him, drawing warmth from them. There had been snarling, shoving, and growling, and many men murmured in fitful sleep. A boy screamed out once, and a guard had come

running down the narrow corridor with bobbing lantern in his hand. Now he sat watching the first light of dawn as it penetrated the open hatch. Kurt steeled himself against the ravaging vermin that had crawled from others to nest in the hair of his body.

He glanced up as sailors passed a small brown loaf of bread to each prisoner. The pungent odor of the over-running privy gave out the raw, smarting smell of urine, but it would have to be endured. As he reached for his portion, the loaf was grabbed from his hand by a nearby prisoner. The guards had gone on to other cages, tossing in the small loaves as they walked by. Kurt's hunger directed his actions, and he reached around the bully's neck and rolled him over his hip. They thrashed about the mucky floor for awhile. Kurt ended up with bloody lips, and his loaf of bread.

The guard's life was monotonous, and as long as the mates didn't catch them at it, they encouraged discontent. Further, a dead convict was the captain's delight—one less to feed and one less to soil the good name of England.

"Anyone feeling too crowded can move in with the crazy Greek," a guard pointed to a cage at the end of the corridor. Kurt craned his neck to look. There was no one in the cage as far as he could see.

"He's asleep on the floor, Jew. Would you like to share his space?" He was joined in his laughter by several other guards. "The Greek was a strong man with a circus in London, and he got in a fight and put several men to their beds. He can't speak the King's English, but he's a fit companion for you, boy."

Kurt looked around him at the sour hostile faces of his cellmates. He had bitter enemies in here and would be subject to constant harassment. "Put me in with the Greek," he said.

The men around him cheered because he was leaving more room for them, and the guards smiled slyly as they marched Kurt between them to the end cage.

As they unlocked the door, Kurt saw a giant stretched on the floor, his feet shackled, his hands and arms fettered behind his back, his body wrapped in chains. Huge muscles bulged against

his trousers and shirt, and thick black hair hung over his shoulders and across his face.

Kurt was shoved into the barred enclosure and the door slammed shut, and locked. The big Greek lay as though dead. A pannikin of water and a loaf of bread had been placed in front of his face.

"Hey, you, Jew boy, you'd better eat the bread. It will probably be your last meal. When he gets conscious he'll likely break out of those chains," called out a guard.

Kurt cautiously walked around the giant stretching his cramped limbs. It felt good to move about, even if it meant facing a madman. He sat down on the floor with his back to the iron bars and looked around him. Each cage was only about the size of the box stalls in Lord Jeffrey's stables. That was why the big Greek had been put alone. Kurt estimated him to be about seven feet tall—about a foot taller than he, and weighing at least twenty stone. There were large swellings on his face and blood had run from the corner of his mouth and dried there.

About an hour later, the huge man began to strain against his bonds. He was like a huge bear, flexing his muscles. Kurt leaned slightly forward to see better, and felt a shiver run up his back as he met angry black eyes that stared at him from the floor. Speaking softly in Greek, Kurt asked, "What is your name?"

Lips snarled in reply, "I will soon kill you!"

"I, too, am a prisoner. I chose to be with you rather than in the cage with the English," Kurt said.

Now Kurt saw the beginnings of understanding. "You are not Greek, boy, but you speak my mother tongue."

"No, I am a Jew, but I learned your language from my grandfather." He watched as the giant seemed to sleep again.

Kurt was surprised when the man rolled onto his side. "Give me water," his voice growled. Kurt held the rim against the swollen lips, watching the huge neck as it swallowed the water in great gulps. The boy broke off chunks of bread and watched as the bruised lips wolfed them down. Afterwards, the Greek rolled back onto his stomach and appeared to sleep again.

The afternoon wore on, and there were outbreaks of fighting in the other cages. At last came the changing of the guards.

Each new one had heard the story of the crazy Greek and the Jew and came to stare at them.

"As soon as he has rested, boy, he'll be breaking his chains and tearing you apart. Now you yell real loud . . . and we'll try to get here in time to save your skin." This witty remark brought laughter from the other convicts.

Quiet settled over the long row of cages. The air was warm, and with a free leading wind, the floor was comparatively level. Kurt leaned against the bars in the corner of his cage and dozed. Suddenly his ears caught on ominous murmuring and he watched as two stocky guards came to stop at the door of his own cage and unlocked the door. One of the guards snapped cuffs on his wrists, then led him out.

His heart flopped and his belly tightened with fear. Could they have heard from home? Or was it punishment for the fight for the bread this morning? Perhaps he was being taken for exercise. As they emerged into the fresh air, he breathed deeply. It smelled wonderfully clean.

Kurt was led below and the guards stopped him before a narrow door. He heard a familiar coughing sound inside the room, and his mind flashed back to the old man who had clutched his belt and brought him to this place instead of the freedom that could have been his.

The door opened and Kurt saw an officer seated behind a small table with the old man standing close behind. He looked up slyly at Kurt and pointed a clawlike finger at him. "'Urt me proper, 'e did. Yes sir, 'ee's the one."

The second mate Malcolm motioned the old man out and addressed Kurt. "You are accused of attempting to escape from the longboat. How do you plead?"

The room was small and stifling, and Kurt felt the perspiration suddenly run down the hollow of his back. He clamped his jaws and nodded his head. It was obvious that the old man had sold information against him for special privileges.

"This first offense will be written in your record, Kurt Bolin. Ten lashes," the mate told the guards. Kurt was led up to the mast. A rope was looped between his wrist chains and threaded through a pulley. Then the rope was pulled until his toes barely touched the deck and his hands were stretched high with his face and belly pressed against the mast.

Kurt bit his lip to keep his panic under control. Suddenly his shirt was ripped from his back and he watched mesmerized as a huge man, bare to the waist, walked into his view, stepped to a tub of seawater and dropped a whip into it—leaving a red stain. He flipped it out full length. Uncoiled it then went to stand behind Kurt.

The boy tensely waited, and his muscles began to quiver. There was conversation and a laugh from a small group of sailors, suddenly there was silence except for the slapping of the rigging against the mast. Kurt heard the angry viperlike “swish” of the whip before it slashed across his back. His mouth jerked open as a wild scream formed in his throat. Rigidly he shut it off by clamping his jaws, and his body recoiled before the next slash came. His head jerked back over his shoulders in an involuntary reflex of protection. He wanted desperately to scream, to somehow reach up to an indifferent God.

Someone had started to count—“seven, eight, nine, domino!” Kurt noticed blood was running down his arms from his wrists. They had been cut by the manacles. His legs had lost their strength, and his full weight was hanging from the iron bands on his arms. He tried to straighten up to thus relieve the pressure when a wave of cold, salty seawater was suddenly thrown over his back. It cleared his mind and his strength returned. When he was finally cut down, he was able to stand to the roll of the ship. As he was led away, another bewildered boy was being hoisted against the mast.

“Hey matey, your back matches your hair now,” a jeering voice called from one of the cells.

“How’d ya like the taste o’ the cat?” jibed another man.

Kurt was actually glad to be back in the cell with the Greek. The giant had been lying on his side. Now he raised his head up to study the boy. Then he rolled on his back and said, “My name is Byzas.”

Kurt began to shake as with a chill. He was reluctant to open his mouth to reply, for he knew that his teeth would chatter. He got awkwardly to his feet and paced a few times across the cage. At last he was able to answer firmly, “I am Kurt Bolin.”

The Greek closed his eyes as though in deep thought, then said, “Sit ye down, Jew. Your prowling makes me nervous.”

Kurt complied, then he saw the beginnings of a smile on the man's craggy features. "My ancestor fought a Jew in Constantinople and beat him," he said.

Kurt's mind went back over the stories his mother and grandfather had told him. "I had an ancestor who fought and beat a mighty Turk."

"My ancestor was a Turk and no Jew ever beat him."

"But you are a Greek?" Kurt was curious now.

"My mother was a Greek slave. I was born in her country for she killed my father and ran back to her own people." He rolled himself over and sat up, leaning against the bars.

Kurt marveled at his shoulder muscles. He could see that his cellmates' blood was both Turk and Greek. But he had seen many battles. His nose was battered and flattened, the scar tissue was thick around his eyes, and his forehead bulged with the recent bruises and beatings.

"What was the name of your ancestor's Turkish opponent?" the Greek demanded.

Kurt searched his memory for the name. "Hassan," he answered briefly. "My ancestor was Kurtsev Bolinski. He won their contest."

"How could such a man have a weak descendant like you? Is that why you only bear a part of his name? You are too small to handle it all? But never you mind that now. That Kurtsev Bolinski was no Jew. He was a Russian, and my ancestor won. And that is the way it stays in my mind."

"Kurtsev married a Jew. He and your ancestor Hassan, became friends and fought together with Peter the Great."

Byzas grinned, "Many men claimed to be friends of the great Hassan to save their lives. Perhaps the Kurtsev did not have sufficient strength in his arms and needed my ancestor's help."

"Well, Kurtsev killed a great mountain bear with his bare hands," cried Kurt indignantly.

"That is brave talk, little Jew, since I am in chains. If I were free I would squeeze you like a grape."

Kurt stood up and ran his fingers through his hair, and the movement gave him a sharp reminder of his painful back.

"How many lashes?"

"Ten," the boy replied, looking to the Greek for some sign

of sympathy. Suddenly he missed his mother's concern, for she worried over every blister and cut.

"Ten lashes! That is nothing. Forget it! Your body knows only the pain your mind tells you of."

"I noticed that your body was anxious enough for the bread I fed you."

"Oh, my body could last for many days. It was my mind that told my body it was time for food."

Kurt and Byzas stared at one another. As a guard walked past, he was disappointed—it looked as though there would be no fight tonight. Lanterns were being lit as darkness fell outside. The convicts began clamoring for their evening food and water. Seamen began passing out the bread and water.

When Kurt received his ration, the sailor whispered, "I will see that you get the deck tomorrow. The sun will help your back." As he turned, Kurt noticed that his left earlobe was missing—torn or cut off.

Kurt sat down with the bowls of water and loaves of bread. He looked toward the hatch opening at the last rays of the evening's light. Byzas sat silently. Kurt turned to him at last and asked innocently, "Does the Greek mind tell his body that it is thirsty and hungry? Or does his body demand that his mind let him eat?" He laughed softly.

The Greek roared out vile Turkish oaths and then he added the few that he knew in English. Kurt smiled and crawled over to sit beside him, holding out the pannikin of water.

"Here, old great one, drink deeply and satisfy both your mind and your body." He then broke the bread into big chunks and fed the helpless man. "The guard said that you would break out of your chains and tear me apart." Kurt raised his eyebrows in question.

Byzas went on chewing, finally replying, "If I was free, I would eat you," then grinned widely.

"Are the chains too strong for such as you to break?"

"As you can see, there are too many of them. One, yes, but several, together—Impossible."

"Perhaps where strength fails, cunning will work better for your release."

The Greek stopped chewing, then asked "What are you saying, little Jew?"

"Between us we do not have the strength, but perhaps I can release you by using my mind."

Kurt looked around him. It was dark now, and the lanterns only dimly lit the cells. He slipped the lockpick from his heel. First he opened the manacles on Byzas' feet, quietly unwinding the chains and laying them to one side. "Stand up now," Kurt whispered.

Byzas shook his head, pointing with his chin to a guard who would pass them in a moment. After he had gone, the giant rose to his feet, and Kurt felt a tremor of concern. He could see why people had paid money to see him wrestle. The muscles on the man's body were beyond anything Kurt had ever imagined. Except statues of Hercules in museums, of course, but they were of stone, while Byzas was flesh and bone—and he was glaring at Kurt for his delay now.

All the chains were soon off, and the Greek strode around the cage like a freed animal, rubbing his wrists and restoring his circulation.

Kurt thought with a wry grin that if he'd expected thanks, he'd not get any. But then he hadn't been torn apart, either.

"Where did you learn that cheap carnival trick? You don't look or act as though you'd ever been away from your mother's lap."

Suddenly Kurt wished with all his soul that he could be home at this moment. His back was like liquid fire. He was caged like an animal with a madman. And he'd been betrayed more than once. But above all, he'd had public humiliation and flogging—which was recorded on his record in the log. And he'd done nothing—nothing! He felt like weeping but held in his feelings. This was a man's world—he would not let them break him. The first port was only a few days away, he thought. Perhaps there would be a chance to escape then.

The big Greek bent over the boy and gently removed his bloody shirt. Using the water left in his bowl he washed the bloody back, then soaked the torn shirt and gently laid it across Kurt's back.

"Try laying on your belly, little Jew. Get some sleep."

Without protest, Kurt did as he was told. In the dimness, he watched as Byzas sat down with his legs crossed, and sat watching him. It seemed that the big man's features had softened. He soon slept.

Chapter Forty-Four

It was not yet daylight when Kurt heard the excited voices of the guards. He was lying on his stomach, and he opened his eyes and looked around at the men standing in the lantern light.

"The crazy Greek has burst loose, 'e 'as."

Another voice spoke, "Looks like the lad's been done in. I say we'd best fetch the mate." Bootheels echoed on the plank floor.

Byzas sat quietly against the iron bars as the guards examined the chains under the lantern's light.

"Why these chains ain't been busted, the locks 'ave been opened."

The sound of footfalls announced the return of the guard and the second mate. "Wot's goin' on 'ere." he demanded.

Kurt rolled carefully over on his side. Every muscle in his body ached, but he was able to rise carefully to his feet. It felt as though his flesh was ripped open, and he could imagine fresh blood running down his back.

"Oh, it's the lad wot's been makin' trouble." The lantern

was held aloft and Kurt could see the mates' anger, as the guard showed him the opened locks.

"Bring the lad," the mate growled.

Byzas rose to his feet and walked toward the men. Kurt saw their gun barrels rise. Two were pointed directly at the heart of the big Greek. The mate stared hard at Byzas and growled, "We have topside burial services every day, and some days there could be two!" His threat was heard and understood by everyone but Byzas. Hurriedly Kurt explained in Greek.

The guards motioned the boy to come with them to the stern of the ship. There, they descended a ladder to the deck below. Suddenly a sledgehammer fist landed in a smashing blow on Kurt's neck. He went plunging to the floor and slid into wooden casks lashed to the ribs of the ship. Two guards reached down and pulled him to his feet, each held an arm, stretching him between them.

Kurt's head was roaring from the blow. He was scarcely conscious when the mate reached forward and ripped his pockets open, to find the small wire picklock.

"Well, well, what have we here?" Then he backhanded Kurt across the face, knocking him down again. "Ten days in solitary, Jew. That will give you time to decide if you want to live or die."

Kurt's eyes were swimming, and he did not see the blow to his chin that knocked him to the floor. The guards released him, took down the lantern, and followed the mate.

Kurt heard the door close and the lock snap shut. He lay there, thinking that he would never be able to move again. Every bone and muscle seemed to scream with pain. Even trying to move his fingers was agonizing. One hand had been stepped on, and he wondered if a bone was broken. He gasped as he tried to move, and then wondered if his ribs were intact. He was far too weak to find out, and for now was content to lie still. He heard the creaking timbers of the ship, and the dripping of water as it came through the seams of the ship. Then in the quiet, he became aware of another sound—scratching and light running. His flesh crawled. Suddenly the sharp claws of a rat ran across his outstretched arm. It had smelled blood. He recoiled instinctively, and managed to get to

his feet. It was pitch black and he was unable to see. Grandfather Roth had told him that vermin caused the plague, and that a bite from an infected rat would bring certain death.

Kurt staggered to the door and beat upon it with his fists. His hands bled. his voice became hoarse. Pride and disdain for pain were meaningless in this black, soundless hole that crawled with rats. His only hope was to stay on his feet and keep moving about. Perhaps he could frighten them away. His eyes searched for a pinpoint of light, but there was none.

At last he stood, exhausted, leaning against the door for support. The mate had said ten days. And in less than ten minutes he had had the most terrifying experience of his life. Was it possible for him to survive? His grandfather's words came to him, "Kurt, your strength will do much for you, my son, but your mind is your best hope of survival."

Well, his strength had been beaten out of him, and his brain was awash with panic! He heard footsteps above him—bootheels sounding far away. He took a deep breath, ready to yell when the hatch over his head was opened and dim light showed a man lowering a beaker of water and a small pail of cooked food.

The sailor glanced around and saw the rats scurrying from the light. "Hist, easy mate," he told Kurt. "I'll get the cat if'n I'm caught. I'll be back in a bit and close the hatch, so get settled while you have some light." The man's footsteps faded as he walked away.

For a long second Kurt stared up at the open hatch. It was far too high to reach. Even if he pulled over a cask and stood on it, he would not be high enough. And if he did manage to get out, where could he go except up against the mast for another flogging and then back into this hole. His lacerated back quivered at the thought of another flogging.

What could he do? His eyes darted around the room seeking an answer. He saw several coils of old rope lying in a corner and some casks lashed to the ribs of the ship. He loosened one, stood on it and looped an end of the rope over a ceiling crossbeam. He would make a hammock out of canvas used for sail repairs. There was a pile nearby. His back was a solid pain from moving the casks and the ropes made his hands bleed. When he pulled out a piece of canvas a nest of rats fell out,

their feet scratching the wood of the planks as they scurried for cover. But now he knew that in case the hatch was closed again, he could build his bed up off the floor.

He worked as fast as he was able and soon had the canvas stretched over the hanging ropes. He was about to climb into his hammock when his eye was caught by a pipe that was set into the wall of the ship. Turning the handle, he let a small stream of cold seawater run in. He took off his clothes and washed his head and face, then squatted down and let it run over his irritated back. Kurt washed his sweaty, filthy clothes and hung them over the hammock ropes. Finally, he sat upon his bed to rest. He heard footfalls and looked up to see the worried sailor.

"Thank you," the boy whispered, but there was no answer as the hatch was closed.

Kurt ran his hand down the rope hanging beside his bed. He counted ten knots. one for each day of his confinement. This would then be the last day. The time had not been too terrible after the first nightmarish hours. He had remembered the words of his grandfather Roth. *There is an inner vision, he had said. It can be penetrating. It will push away darkness, and increase alertness and awareness by concentration.* Kurt had thought that through and decided to keep busy. He had taken daily seawater baths between the two meals. The rest of the time he used for study. That was easy, for it was a habit started with his first baby steps and had continued daily until he had gone to work at the stables.

Now on this tenth day, he had completed memorizing the Torah in French. He felt satisfied, for he had already translated the holy words into Greek.

The afternoon meal was served near five o'clock, and he waited for it eagerly. When the seaman brought it, he set the lantern on the floor. "I'll leave the lantern here, mate, while you put things shipshape. I'll be back in an hour."

Kurt ate, enjoying the lamplight. His ten days in solitary were over at last. He washed, then he pulled down the hammock, wrestled the cask back into its place, and secured it with the others. He checked everything and then called out that the place was ready.

Two guards marched him back to his cage and along the way he heard hoots, some cheers and remarks like, "Did the rats nip your toes. mate?" Even the jibes felt good, he was so glad to be back in the light and company of other humans.

The Greek was sitting at the back of the cage with his legs in fetters. He seemed to pay no attention as Kurt entered, but his eyes took in the boy's condition and he was visibly surprised at what he saw. The boy had scabs on his cheeks, and a swollen nose, but he walked with a springy bounce. Byzas could visualize the brutal beating that had inflicted scars that were still visible after ten days—yes, the fists, the knees, and the bootheels. The boy's back was nearly healed and he was clean, with clothes that had been washed. The lad looked like he'd spent his time in a clean hospital bed rather than in the dirty hold with the rats.

Byzas broke the silence. "Solitary?"

Kurt nodded, looking straight ahead, yet taking in the welcome sight and sounds of human life around him.

"Dark?"

Kurt nodded again, then leaned to stretch and touch the familiar bars of the cage.

"Rats?" The big Greek was beginning to feel irritated by the boy's silence.

A faint smile appeared on Kurt's lips. He was beginning to enjoy his heroic role. He had endured the black solitary confinement and come out clean, fed, and exercised. He got to his feet and stretched luxuriously.

Suddenly Byzas reached out and put his big hand around Kurt's ankle. With a roar that brought a chilled silence along the full length of the hold, he pulled the boy's feet from under him and gathered him into a huge bear hug, raising him high over his head.

Guards came running with their muskets leveled. They were certain that the Greek had gone stark raving mad, but they drew to a halt as they saw his mouth open with jubilant laughter as he swung Kurt around and placed him down gently.

Several more guards had come running, but they all left as the boy and the Greek sat side by side, talking. In the ten days that Kurt had been in confinement, a pattern of activity had

begun for the convicts. Rope mats had been provided, the cages had been perfumed with vinegar, and all of the men went topside for exercise and eating. Each prisoner was given a task about the ship.

Kurt stretched out again on his mat. Lights, no rats, and full stomach!

"Why do you have the fetters on your ankles," he asked Byzas.

"I worked on the bilge pump today, and they were perhaps afraid that I would try to escape."

"You will not sleep well with them."

"Don't worry," the Greek replied.

Kurt heard a rattle and then felt the chains land on his belly. "No, Byzas, not that again. The guards will think that I took them off again, and I'll have to go back to that hellhole."

"Look closely, little Jew. I squeeze the round bracelets, make them oval, then slip my heels through. Before daylight I put them back on again and make them round."

It was the middle of the night when Kurt became aware of movement. He thought of rats and drew his feet up quickly. He sat up, peering into the darkness and he was able to make out a dark figure creeping down the line of the cages. He could see no vermin on the floor. The strong scent of vinegar usually kept the rats back. He decided to search the cage.

Byzas spoke softly, "What is it, little Jew?"

Kurt held up a six-inch-knife. "It will mean another flogging if the guards find it," the Greek told him.

"But maybe someone is trying to help me."

"More likely someone hates you and is trying to get you in more trouble. Here. I'll get rid of it." Byzas the Greek took the blade, flipped his wrist, and whirled it up into the timbered rafters above their heads. The point buried itself with a soft dull thud. They both relaxed and went back to sleep.

Before daylight, second mate Malcolm and two marines unlocked their door. With muskets leveled, they motioned Kurt and Byzas to one side and made a thorough search. Kurt was relieved to see that his cellmate had fetters on both ankles. The mate, finally looked silently around the cage. Saying nothing, he ordered the two marines to slam the iron door shut.

Byzas and Kurt tried to rest again but less than an hour later they were both called to pump duty.

Kurt all but ran up the steps through the hatch. He had wondered if he would ever see full daylight again. The sky was beginning to lighten, the sea gulls were riding the breeze, and the air smelled salty sweet. He drew a deep breath and filled his lungs. There was still some pain in his side where the mate had kicked him, but even this was good, it meant he was alive.

At the pump leg irons were fastened to their legs and secured then to a ringbolt in the deck.

"It will take three hours to empty the bilge," said the seaman, "And longer if you are slow. You eat when you are finished."

Kurt was hungry. He grabbed a handle and started to pump. Pushing the handle down was easy, but pulling it back up without help was hard. He looked at Byzas and taunted him, "Is the great Turk, Hassan's descendant, too weak to do his share of the work?"

"One of these times I will crush you, little Jew." Byzas grabbed the handle with one hand, jerking it up and down so fast that Kurt could hardly hold on. As they worked, they watched the marines marching up and down the decks. There were several hundred, most of them very raw recruits and awkward.

"There's many country boys who don't know their left foot from their right," Kurt mumbled as his arms moved up and down in rhythm with Byzas.

The Greek was staring at the forward deck where a small section had been roped off and women convicts were exercising and eating. Kurt grinned at his friend.

"Shut up, Jew," Byzas roared.

"I haven't said a word."

"You were going to."

Kurt turned to look at a large group of men that seemed to be idling, holding cards in their hands. Political prisoners, he thought, and some Irish strikers.

After an hour of tedious and arduous work, Kurt could feel large blisters forming in the palms of his hands. His muscles were tiring also. Another hour passed and he finally looked and was appalled to see three large watery blisters. His hands had

been toughened by pitchfork and wheelbarrow, but this was different work and too much for too long.

"It is nothing," said Byzas. "Do not think about it."

Kurt gave him a dark look. Then his attention was caught by two seamen who were carrying a big coil of rope across the deck. One of them was Joxer. How was it possible for that boy to become an apprentice seaman when he had been sentenced to Australia as a prisoner? Had Joxer been the one to slip the knife under his mat?

Byzas stopped work, and a seaman came to examine the pump. It was dry. It had taken them less than three hours.

"You lads can work on the oakum pile until your food is ready." The seaman took off their fetters and led them away. Kurt slowed as his name was called and he saw Elijah Peck with a piece of black bread in his hand. He winked in a friendly manner. The guard shoved Kurt, ordering, "Move along."

A scream from aloft caught everyone's attention. They watched, mesmerized, as a seaman fell from high in the rigging. He landed on the deck with a crash. Kurt ran over to help and recognized the man with the missing earlobe. His legs were twisted under him and blood seeped from his nose and mouth. He was unconscious.

Kurt shouted, "Don't move him. His back could be broken."

There was a momentary pause. Byzas slipped up beside him and motioned everyone to stand back and wait for the doctor.

The first mate, Mr. Hawksbury, came toward them and the men stepped aside to let him through, fingers pointing at Kurt. As the Mate turned icy eyes on the boy, Kurt could almost hear the counting of the lashes as they fell once again across his back.

The ship's surgeon, Emile Villier, elbowed his way to the fallen sailor.

"We would have brought him to your quarters, sir, had not this convict stopped us," the mate said.

"The lad did the right thing. That could have killed the poor fellow. Is a stretcher on the way?"

"In a moment, sir." The mate bent over the seaman, and Kurt wondered if he was already dead.

The doctor looked at Kurt, and both recognized their common ancestry. Byzas prodded Kurt with his elbow. A rope

dangled nearby. It had been cleanly cut with a knife. He understood. Had he secreted the knife and it had been found the sailor's mishap would be blamed on him.

The guard moved Kurt and Byzas away. They would finally eat. When their bowls were filled with the beans, they were handed a chunk of black bread. It took but a few minutes to finish their meal, but they were still hungry. They were not allowed to rest, but were immediately pressed into a crew of deck scrubbers.

Each man was given a tub of seawater and a block of holystone. The guards stood over them as they cleaned the oak planks covering the decks. The salt burned through Kurt's blisters and during the next few hours, the pain became almost intolerable.

The Greek worked beside him. "Put your back into your work, little Jew. You work like an old woman."

Kurt pretended not to hear, but the remark made him angry. Mr. Brewster, the stable master had never complained, and he had always done more than his share. As he dipped his holystone into a bucket, he saw blood mixing with the seawater as it ran across the stone. He wasn't sure that he could take much more.

Byzas calmly remarked, "It is nothing, boy. Don't think about it. Your hands won't fall off, even though they feel like it."

They hadn't seen the second mate standing behind them. "What are you and that dumb ox talking about?" he demanded.

Kurt sat back on his heels and returned the man's hard stare. "He says this is old woman's work, and I agreed with him."

An evil smile played briefly across the mates' thin lips. "I will find work that will be more to your satisfaction, Jew."

Kurt felt an impelling wish to tackle the man, and he knew that he could whip him.

Byzas sensed his mood and whispered, "It is nothing, lad. Wait for a better time."

The day finally ended and Byzas and Kurt were eating the second and the last meal of the day. The boy gingerly held a bowl of peas and fat in his hands. He wasn't sure that he could hold it long enough to finish.

"Rub the juice and fat into your hands. The suet will help to heal them," the Greek advised. Kurt did as he was told, fishing peas out with his bread.

As the sun set, a plague of gnats swarmed over the ship. Hatches were closed and gratings covered. The men grumbled their discomfort due to the suffocating air. Kurt, too, became restless and began to pace the cell. Both hands were swollen and painful, but the suet had perhaps made them a little less stiff. When your hands are screaming with pain, how can you go to sleep? Then there was the sailor that had nearly been killed . . . perhaps he was even dead by now. *Poor Billy Buckle*, a man had said, shaking his head. Someone had cut the line, and if the man died, it would be murder.

The doctor was a Jew, he was sure of it. He hoped that he would have a chance to talk to him. At last his weariness allowed him to forget his hands and fall asleep.

The next morning Kurt and Byzas were part of a line-up for sail repairs. It was a difficult job, requiring pulling two-inch-rope. The coarse strands and sharp fibers soon had Kurt's hands bleeding.

At last it was time to eat. Kurt took his bowl of beans and found a place to sit. The Greek stood alongside him, looking out over the rolling seas. Wearily Kurt looked up at him, marveling at the man's great strength and simple philosophy. He accepted what he couldn't change and made his muscles meet all challenges. As he watched, Byzas filled his great chest with the sweet warm salt air, and his gaze remained steady on the far horizon of Africa.

"A few more weeks, little Jew, and we will make our landing at Freetown, in Africa." Kurt had a feeling that Byzas' thoughts were far from the convict ship.

Chapter Forty-Five

The knock on his door was irritating to Captain Teague, for he was in conference with the ship's surgeon. The first mate entered and went directly to the log, then turned to leave the room without a word.

"One moment, Mr. Hawksbury. The doctor reports that one of the convicts needs medical attention. This is your concern."

"What is the problem, sir?"

"Mr. Hawksbury," said the captain, "I dislike this involvement in convict affairs. As first mate, I expect you to handle all their problems. It is enough that I do my duty to God and my country to rid the shores of England of its vermin." His eyes turned to the doctor, "I can well understand your concern, sir, for a bonus of ten shillings per convict at the end of a journey is certainly an incentive to keep them healthy."

Mr. Villiers, raised his hand to protest, but the mate shouted, "What are you accusing me of, sir? Are you saying that I am killing them? Those seven men lost were lost because the doctor was incapable of curing them. That was no fault of mine."

Villiers leaned forward in his chair. "Six of those men were incurably ill before they boarded. One man was beaten to death."

The mate took a belligerent step forward, but the captain said mildly, "No, no, Mr. Hawksbury, you are not on trial here. Doctor Villiers, my apologies for my comments on financial incentives. The nut of the matter is that the doctor reports that the life of Billy Buckle was saved by the convict lad, Kurt Bolin."

"By merely asking that he not be moved?" the mate sneered. "And that big Greek ox with him raised his hands against my men."

The doctor's keen eyes noticed the swollen veins of the mate's throat, and he thought that heavy drinking and unbridled passions would likely bring the fellow to him as a patient before this trip was over.

The officer was uncomfortable under the doctor's gaze. He was proud of his strength, and contemptuous of weaker men. Sick men were an irritation to him. He also felt that the doctor kept men away from their duties longer than necessary. Impatiently, he grasped the door handle and opened it to demand of the sailor standing there, "Have Mr. Malcolm report to me here at once—with his log and also the convict, Bolin."

The captain rose to his feet, "Oh, I say, Mr. Hawksbury. is all this necessary?

"My methods are in question here, sir. It *is* necessary."

The doctor watched him with level eyes, and the thought crossed his mind that this could possibly result in even greater punishment for the boy. The lad had shown superior intelligence and good judgment, and he would like to help him.

The second mate, Mr. Malcolm, came hurrying into the room with his logbook under his arm. He gave a quick salute, and said, "The prisoner will be brought here shortly, sirs."

"Read us the report on the Jew, Kurt Bolin, Mr. Malcolm," ordered Hawksbury.

"May twentieth, eighteen hundred and eighteen, Bolin attempted escape while being transferred from the prison to the ship. He struck and seriously injured another prisoner who tried to prevent his escape. He was sentenced to ten lashes.

Sentence carried out." He took a deep breath and then continued.

"June sixteenth, Kurt Bolin removed chains and fetters from a dangerous prisoner using an illegal lockpick. Sentenced to ten days solitary confinement. Sentence carried out." He paused to turn the page.

"July first, Kurt Bolin disregarded orders from an officer of the ship, and refused to stand by when ordered. Sentenced to twenty-five lashes."

"The doctor asked, 'Was the sentence carried out? Was it not this action that saved the sailor's life?'"

"The convict in question is part of a work detail, sir, and I have needed him for a few days. I have yet to carry out the sentence, but I will do so, you may be sure, sir."

"I believe the boy may be capable of serving as my medical assistant," announced Doctor Villiers, "but of course, I need to talk to him. If he has the right qualifications, the lad could serve his sentence under me."

The three officers were speechless for a long moment, then the second mate asked in a raspy voice, "What could a convict possibly know that would be of assistance to you?"

The captain brushed aside the question. "This is unheard of, doctor. You heard his record of antagonism and resistance to authority. The boy is dangerous. Surely, you could find a more suitable assistant from among the 'gentlemen' prisoners. There is an architect, a schoolmaster, and several well educated political prisoners as well as the women convicts." He turned to the first mate. "I am sure that Mr. Hawksbury could tell you the qualifications of any of these females."

The mate's face reddened, he was indeed well aware of the women, in fact, one was waiting in his quarters right now. They would have a meal together and talk a bit, before other things. A tap on the door caught his attention.

A guard announced, "I have the prisoner here, sir."

The first mate saw the tall red-haired boy, Kurt Bolin, behind him. "Tell him to wait outside," he ordered, then turned to the captain. "Sir, do you wish to let this convict inside?"

"I will remind you, Mr. Hawksbury, that you are the one who gave the order to have him brought here." The captain was enjoying the mate's discomfort.

Finally, he smiled thinly and continued to provoke him. "Perhaps the doctor should take the lad to his quarters to question him, where he can thus better assess his qualifications."

The mate's jaw clenched with frustration, and the doctor noted the obvious increase in blood pressure as the big vein in his neck swelled. Hawksbury stared at the captain and thought furiously, that the second mate should have gotten the flogging over, and then the boy would not be in any condition to help anyone. His thoughts flitted to the woman waiting for him in his quarters and he suddenly whirled on Mr. Malcolm. "Vince, you heard the captain. Escort the prisoner to the doctor's quarters under guard."

The second mate took it for granted that after the interview, the sentence of twenty-five lashes was to be carried out.

Kurt followed the doctor to his quarters. Suddenly the boom of a cannon could be heard. The guard stayed in the doorway as the doctor led Kurt through his office to the clinic where a row of patients lay on their cots.

The doctor smiled reassuringly at them. "We are not in battle. It is just a drill."

They quickly went to Billy Buckle's side. His head was swathed in bandages, his legs and one arm were splinted. The sailor's eyes were open, though they were sunken into his head. He gave a faint smile of recognition as Kurt reached over and took his hand.

Villiers stood beside them. "He knows of your help, lad. He had several ribs broken. and moving him would most certainly have caused death."

The patients' meals were brought in, and Kurt followed the doctor back to his office. The doctor said, "Tell me about yourself, boy."

Kurt felt his throat tighten. He was uncertain how to begin. There were so many things—his mother, his missing father, his grandfather, and Lord Jeffrey—and the girl, Megan.

"Were you born in London?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you taken out citizenship papers?"

"Oh, no, sir. I could not have raised the necessary money,

nor could I accept the king's communion." He noticed the quick flush that came to the doctor's face. "Are you a New Christian, sir?"

The doctor uncrossed his legs and stood up. "Yes. Though I have love and deep respect for the old ways and traditions, it was necessary for me to take the oath." He paused and gave Kurt a sober look. "There are many advantages. For instance, when we get to Australia, I will be given a large tract of land. Following your pardon; say, in five or ten years, you, too, will be eligible for a tract of land, but only if you become a citizen."

It troubled Kurt that an educated man, such as the doctor, could care so much for social and economic advantages that he dropped the faith of his fathers.

"I don't care about land, sir. I am going back to England when I am free."

"England has too many people, Kurt. Even the big estates will be cut up soon. Australia is a new, rich, and fertile land, a frontier. There a man could build an empire of his own—sheep, horses, cattle—and raise a family. Everything is there that a man could care for."

What he was saying caught a responsive note in Kurt, but still he had to explain. "But I must return to my mother, sir."

"Lad, you could have your mother come to Australia when the time is right." He fingered some instruments in their cases. "I must have mislaid a knife. Well, it must be around somewhere."

Suddenly the ship rocked violently, then they heard a terrible explosion and a loud blast.

"God help us!" exclaimed the doctor. Screams of pain came from patients who had been thrown from their cots.

Kurt regained his balance on the rocking ship and followed the doctor at a run. They found the side of the ship demolished—fire began to lick its way across the planks of the upper deck. There, bodies were strewn about in grotesque shapes. Powder smoke was so thick it burned the nostrils and it was impossible to see the full scope of the damage through the flames that were reaching everywhere. But the sounds of the maimed and dying filled his ears.

Marines and sailors rushed into the smoky flames and through their concerted efforts order was brought to save the

ship. Even the convicts worked willingly, if only to save their own lives.

Kurt bent to the task of helping the doctor minister to the injured around them—separating the living from the dead. Soon a line of wounded were being carried to the gunnery.

First mate Hawksbury sat at a small table across from the convict girl Molly. They had finished their meal of steamed rice and fish in his cabin and now he sipped alone from a glass of wine. The girl had declined, smiling modestly. He saw the faint lines etched at the corners of her eyes, the kind that he knew usually associated with her trade. Still, she had spoken of an ailing mother, and long work hours. He supposed that this could account for her faintly raddled condition. Still, her hands were soft and without the usual look of the poorer class.

Molly, with modestly lowered eyes, felt Hawksbury's gaze and his interest. When he reached for the bottle again, she knew that he had come to a decision. She raised her eyes to his with tender pleading. He must not allow her to go back to the other women prisoners, to spend her life in such circumstances. Her offenses must not be allowed to ruin her life. Her eyes filled with unshed tears at her own plight, and her soft red lips opened with a tremulous smile as she leaned toward him.

Mr. Hawksbury's arm went around her when an explosion jolted through the ship. His wine glass shattered and the bottle fell to the floor. As it rolled across the table, its contents left a blood-red trail across the white cloth.

Mr. Hawksbury left on a run for the deck. Molly uprighted the wine bottle, taking a long draught before she then swiftly followed him.

Captain Teague had for the past few minutes been admiring his little canary. The practice drilling and the booming of the cannon was an irritation to him. It surely must be possible to teach those louts without the waste of good gunpowder!

Who would want to attack a convict ship was more than the imagination could conjure, the captain thought, who would even want to come within sight, not to mention smell, of them. The captain's thoughts were sour as he glanced at the raindrops streaking down the window and the tossing sea beyond. He glanced at his watch just as an explosion jerked him almost off

his feet. It was a familiar feeling, one that he had experienced off Cape Trafalgar with Lord Nelson when they had taken a broadside.

Suddenly, he felt the panic of utter helplessness. He braced himself and considered what was best to do. First, he would need a report, and then he could give the orders to abandon ship. He dashed out into the rain. He must take command!

The deck was in utter chaos. He raised his hand and called the first mate. No one took any notice.

Byzas was with a work crew midships when he heard the explosion. Kurt had not returned, so he rushed to the scene of the disaster, shouldering his way through the men. He had no curiosity, no feeling of responsibility, and no panic for his own safety, for he could survive yet another ship wreck as he had done before. But the young red-headed Jew boy had somehow entered into his most hidden emotions and gone deep into a heart that he had thought long dead. As he viewed the carnage, he stood with his feet spread apart against the pitching of the ship. His arms were stretched out as though single-handed he would bring life back to the boy if necessary. The thought of death was intolerable to him, and a black despair was threatening when he saw Kurt. He began to shout as he saw the boy rush into the heart of the flames. He followed.

A screaming officer, a lieutenant, was pinned under a huge, fallen timber. Kurt moved in to help, when a big hand clamped his shoulder, and he was pushed out of the way.

Byzas stooped under the huge timber and then slowly straightened his legs. The light from the flames flickered across his straining muscles. Slowly the timber lifted and he slid it across the wet deck, then turned to help Kurt lift a cannon from the now unconscious man's legs and pull him out. Byzas carried the officer like a child, and with singing hair, they strode out of the inferno into the cool rain.

Hoses were now pumping seawater across the flames as Kurt dropped to the doctor's side. He saw a prone figure, with slender wrists and hands, white except for the blood on them. He glanced up, shocked. It was a woman, one with dark hair like his mother's. She gave him a direct look, seeing a tall, handsome, red-haired young man. Kurt gave her a friendly

smile. His very soul reached for her. This was perfect beauty compared to the harsh, brutal, raw, convict life. Here was a lovely woman with a smile that reached to meet his. Yet, somehow there was a—difference, one that was unfamiliar. Her look seemed to carry a challenge. A smell of burning flesh and the doctor's voice broke the spell.

Smoke had now filtered into the convict's quarters. The explosion had caused panic, but now there was bedlam. They were panic-stricken at being locked in with the ship on fire. Men clawed over each other to reach the bars, pull them away and somehow force their way out. Some slipped on the slime from overturned privies and fell to the floor. They were trampled, struck on the face, and kicked. Free men can face death, but caged fear drives out sanity and men become beasts.

A crippled ship is a blot on the horizon that nature will not tolerate for long. The winds will topple it and the oceans will swallow or drive it onto the seashore. So it was now with the convict ship *Determined*. She was a cripple, the winds were building, and the waves were swelling.

The fires were at last under control, and the cursing sailors looked heavenward with gratitude for the rain. Captain Teague had changed the course to make for Freetown. The mates were supervising the ship's carpenters and the crew in making repairs. Everyone was on the alert, and even the sick men had turned out to lend a hand at the halyards, for with a heavy sea astern, it now took two men at the wheel to steer the heavy, lumbering ship.

The captain was in his quarters poring over his charts. Though the weather was again hot, he had somehow picked up a cold, probably from long exposure and lack of sleep. There would be an afternoon service for the dead, an event that he dreaded. There were so many things that rested heavily on his shoulders. They were now lost from their convoy and lacked a frigate escort. A converted transport ship like the *Determined* was of course no prize for pirates, but she did carry stores of supplies, powder and shot. However, there was no option as to their course. They must put in for repairs at the little town of Freetown.

A tap came at the door and he swung around to face the first mate. Somewhat gruffly the captain asked, "What is the situation, Mr. Hawksbury?"

"Twelve dead, six seriously injured, twelve on the sick list."

The captain wondered how this man could be so unemotional. He hated the thought of being tied up in the port with this mate and crew.

Chapter Forty-Six

The *Determined* tugged at her anchors in a light wind. The towering waves rolled ponderously toward the islands and the sandy coastline of the Sierra Leone Colony on the coast of Africa.

Kurt, working on his knees scouring grime from the deck with a holystone, straightened up as he moved forward, to cast a quick eye toward shore. This was a land of mystery where rice and rum were traded for slaves, gold, and ivory; a land of wild natives and wilder animals. Now he got a sour look from Byzas, for he was falling behind in his work. The big Greek set an unmerciful pace, and it took all of Kurt's concentration and strength to keep up with him. The relentless sun beat down on his back, drying the sweat as quickly as it formed. It had turned his fair skin to a deep mahogany color. Byzas always wore a shirt, but his neck, face, arms, and hands were almost as black as the hair on his head, and his short beard stirred in the hot wind that moved across the deck.

Kurt watched the longboat that carried the captain and most of the officers and injured ashore. The second mate was in command.

"Keep every man working, Mr. Malcolm. Allow no one off this ship. I will return at this time tomorrow. Any attack by pirates will come by sea, so keep your men prepared—and watch those candles. We certainly don't need another fire."

The mate lost no time in barking out orders. He was going to use his authority to its fullest extent.

Billy Buckle watched him from his seat on the deck, his splinted legs and arm wrapped in light bandages. The Royal Marines stood guard with loaded muskets in hand and sabres at their sides while the convicts and crew worked at tarring, greasing, oiling, varnishing, painting, scraping, bracing, repairing sails, pulling ropes, climbing, and hauling. Billy thought placidly that there could never be an end to work on a sailing vessel.

Kurt moved close to Byzas, "Have you seen Joxer?"

"There will be no talking while you are at work," Malcolm yelled. "You've got twenty-five of the best coming, Jew, and I can add a few more for disobedience." His big jaw was thrust forward. "And another thing, I still think you're the one who nearly killed poor Billy." He glanced over at the sailor. "No, I'm not finished with my investigation of that incident."

Kurt forced his mind away from the mates' threats as he bent to work with the holystone. Instead, he tried to remember what his grandfather had told him about Freetown. Suddenly he recalled the report that Lord Jeffrey had funded, a program to take the black unemployed from London streets to their homes in Freetown, Africa. Grandfather had been concerned, for his Lordship had committed large sums with hope of a profit from the crops of the new settlers. *It will not be successful*, his grandfather had said. Kurt glanced at the distant sprawling city and wondered who had been right. But at least there was a town there, though it had been pillaged and burned many-times. Kurt's thoughts came back to his work as the mate called a break when the steward and his helpers staggered onto the deck with a huge cauldron of food. The men lined up with their bowls, anxious for the brief respite.

"Joxer was sent to the other ship, lad," Byzas said quietly in answer to Kurt's question.

Kurt looked toward the land, then he let his eyes stray toward the women's quarters, but the women were not in sight.

Captain Don Demonio had white hair, not the gray of age but pure white of an albino. His pink face was clean-shaven and tender, easily burned by wind and sun. Thus he wore a wide-brimmed hat as well as a silk scarf around his neck for protection. His thin face had a greasy look from the salves and ointments he used to help heal many small sores and to also protect his sensitive skin from further irritation. He was a thin and wiry man, and his nervous way of walking was an indication of his explosive nature. He ran his ship with a stern hand.

Now he paced the deck of the *Black Princess*. It was a ship designed for slaving. She was lean and sharp, and carried two masts. Even though her main defense lay in flight, she carried two long guns on her decks, and she was armed with eleven twelve-pound cannons. The *Princess* could outmaneuver any vessel on the seas and, downwind, she could not be caught.

Captain Demonio looked about him with satisfaction, noting that every weapon was ready. The gun ports were open, and muskets by the dozen were loaded and stacked along the bulwarks.

The *Princess* was fully loaded with human black cargo. Row-on-row, thigh-to-thigh, on decks built so close together that there was scarcely sitting room, and certainly not space to stand, were slaves. They were stripped naked, for it was easier that way to hose them down with seawater. Still, they were not clean now, for they had been in their chains between decks since early morning, and now the stench could be smelled over a hundred yards away. To the mates and crew it smelled like what it was, but to Captain Demonio it smelled like gold. He would receive five hundred dollars for each slave delivered in good health. He smiled grimly as he thought that blackbirding had heavy risks, but the rewards were worth the gamble.

Captain Demonio and his first mate stood on the foc'sl peering into the blackness of the night. As they rounded a wide curve in the river, they made out a few twinkling lights from the town. Suddenly they saw the shape of a ship before them. He felt a sudden surge of anger and impatience.

"What a stroke of bad luck," he hissed. "Damn the British. They're thicker than lice on a kinky head." He recognized the shape of a British warship, not realizing that the *Determined* had been converted to carry convicts. He thought with anger that there would be Royal Marines aboard with enough cannon to blast a dozen ships like his out of the water. He would just have to outmaneuver the warship.

Kurt was lying on his mat trying to sleep with his hands behind his head. Lazily he listened to the snoring sounds around him. Abruptly he heard the guard fumbling at his cage door. "Hey, Jew, Mr. Malcolm wants a word with you. Bring along the dumb ox as well."

Byzas was already on his feet, and the guards kept their rifles at the ready as shackles were put on both prisoners. Kurt had a momentary feeling of desperation, perhaps this was a good moment to rush the guard and escape. Byzas and he could easily make their way ashore, and Byzas knew the dialects of the people here.

The Greek caught his question and muttered, "Not now little Jew. Not yet."

"No talking," ordered the guards as they marched them both out of the hold and up toward the captain's quarters. Kurt's quick eye caught the dim shape of a dark ship just coming into the estuary, but his thoughts were elsewhere. The second mate was seated in the captain's chair. He had obviously been drinking. A small group of sailors were keeping him company.

Now he stared malevolently at the two prisoners, then set a bottle down on the desk and he wiped his hand across his lips.

Kurt's eyes were suddenly glued to a knife that had been stuck into the desktop. He saw Malcolm's wolfish smile. This was the surgeon's tool that had been hidden in their cell.

The mate reached out for the handle, carefully touching the polished steel blade. He then picked up two pistols that lay on the desk. They were primed, he cocked them, then casually pointed each one at the two prisoners.

Softly, Malcolm ordered, "Call the watch. They will witness what we do here tonight. Aye, men, you'll both have a dram after this night's work is done. You are both well aware that the captain has left me in charge of this ship—and of the prisoners and men as well. You know that a cut line caused Billy to fall to

the deck. It nearly killed him. This is the weapon that did it, and it was found in the beam above the cage of these two prisoners. There is no doubt that they are guilty. And by law, any prisoner taking up arms must be punished by death."

The seamen looked startled. They could understand a flogging, but surely not this, and at night! Why did the second mate not wait for daylight and assemble everyone—use this for an example?

Vince Malcolm saw their question and said aggressively, "It was attempted murder. This knife was stolen from the ship's doctor." He paused and then added, "Remember that these men are not Christians—one is a Jew, and the other is of Islam. Think how many brave Christian lads were buried at sea with the explosion. Others lie wounded now in their bunks. Yes, these heretics bring evil to our ship."

The mate raised the bottle to his lips again before he added softly, "And there is still the matter of unfinished business to be attended to. The Jew was sentenced to twenty-five lashes. We will take care of that matter first." He rose unsteadily to his feet. "Get all hands on deck including the prisoners and the marines. They will all learn that rebellion is a gallows' offense. Take these two to the mast."

As the two convicts were shoved out, Byzas whispered in Greek, "Watch me. We will make a break for it."

Suddenly there was a yell from the watch, and everyone turned to see the *Princess* drawing swiftly alongside the *Determined*. Men ran for battle stations just as a lethal broadside hit the convict ship.

Kurt grabbed the guard who held the keys to their shackles. No one paid any attention to them as Byzas ripped open the man's pocket. It took but a few moments to free themselves from their chains, though they could do nothing about the double-studded iron neck collars.

The ship was taking water fast, and now she was starting to sink. Byzas and Kurt rushed by groups of screaming, pleading men toward the infirmary. Kurt found Elijah Peck wounded but alive and Byzas carried Billy in his arms. They shoved a raft into the water, and climbed in. Using short boards for paddles, they began to row slowly over the mountainous Atlantic waves toward the shore. They all stopped and watched silently as the

Determined bowed as though in prayer, paused for a few seconds, and then slid down into the restless waters of the sea.

Myron Fanshaw smiled at his two guests as he did his utmost to show interest in this dull conversation. He would have preferred to be home in bed, for he felt poorly, a condition that prevailed generally among the whites in Freetown. However the governor's duty was to be here, in this private dining room at the Landmark Hotel. The room was paneled in a soft native wood, was thickly carpeted and lit with dozens of candles in a crystal chandelier.

Captain Alfred C. Teague, the honored guest, was enjoying this brief interlude with men he considered his peers as he ate this civilized meal of guinea fowl stuffed with eggs. He enjoyed the excellent wine. As he waited for his glass to be refilled yet again, he looked at the other guest, Captain Ralph Brading, the commander of the regulars in Freetown. The man could obviously rule his men by strength as well as authority. Captain Teague took another sip of wine as he studied the big army captain, then raised his glass to make yet another toast.

"To Lord Nelson," he said reverently.

The three glasses touched and he continued, droning on. "Yes, it was my experience with him that made me competent to handle my ship for the king's needs. It was also why I was able to save her from disaster when the ammunition blew."

The other men exchanged wry glances, for this was the third telling of the *Determined's* story.

". . . it happened during a cannon drill. Some raw midshipman, not properly trained, no doubt. We may never know. It was obviously a military blunder, and I have so noted in my log." He raised his glass to Captain Brading, "It is good, sir, to be under your protection from slavers and pirates. The seas today are fraught with this lawless element."

The captain wearily answered, "Yes, the pirates are thicker than fleas on a dog, but blackbirders. . . ." he brought his fist down on the table to rattle the glasses, "We've had no trouble there since I've been here!"

Myron Fanshaw stirred restlessly, for at this moment he was aware that the *Princess* would soon be at sea with yet another load of slaves. He looked up into Captain Brading's steel-blue

eyes. This man had a sense of duty that was not to be trifled with, and he hoped that Captain Demonio would get safely out of the harbor without trouble. Well, another half hour should be sufficient time to hold the two captains here. He stole a quick glance at the drapes. As hot as it was, they must be securely drawn so there would be no sign of the slave ship from the wide window. His thoughts reluctantly returned to the dull conversation.

Captain Brading decided that he could stand no more of this. He had already wasted several hours. Surely it would be acceptable for him to leave now. His muscles twitched and revolted at the inactivity. He looked hopefully at Myron Fanshaw, hoping for a sign of relief. The captain's eyes narrowed as he studied the man's face, for the governor was suddenly on edge. What was troubling the man? He turned courteously as Captain Teague raised his glass yet again to propose another toast. Suddenly they were stunned at the sound of the loud booms of several cannon.

"Pirates," yelled Brading as the three men charged from the room.

Captain Teague had some difficulty staggering after the other men. "Oh, not another fire!" he muttered desperately.

"It appears that your ship has been attacked by pirates," announced the governor, gazing over the water from his perch on a big rock.

Captain Brading silently handed Captain Teague a spy glass. When he focused, he could see his ship like a whale standing on its tail. His face paled and his knees turned to jelly. His ship was sinking!

Captain Brading noted that the governor's hands were trembling and his face glistened with sweat. Could the man have known of this? With grim determination, he decided to look into this. He turned and made his way swiftly down to his men at the beach. He gathered a company, and within a few minutes had boats in the water to rescue any survivors.

First Mate Hawksbury was involved in a brawl in a tavern at the time the cannon raked his ship. It was not until later that he heard of it. A man came running in with the news of the attack

on the *Determined*. Mr. Hawksbury's face whitened, and he went running, leaving his expensive new beaver hat behind, as he ran down the road to the shore. He pushed his way through the crowd to the captain's side.

"What happened?"

Helplessly the captain answered, "Never a shot from my ship. Someone's neck will stretch for this night's work." They were beached—stranded—in Africa.

Kurt and Byzas rowed endlessly through giant rollers. Finally they saw the distant lights of shore. This was the boy's first look at Africa. He knew that to the north stretched the great desert and the lands of the pharaohs and pyramids. To the south were great rain forests and jungles. He had read of this with his grandfather.

At last they entered the smoother waters of the harbor, and men holding torches waded out to help them beach the raft. Strong hands grasped the rope and pulled them toward a cheering crowd. Byzas picked Billy up in his arms, wading into the shallows toward shore. Kurt helped Elijah off, and with an arm under the man's shoulder, they made their way through the waters.

A red-faced and shouting Captain Teague pushed his way toward them. He ignored the water swirling around his legs and pointed and screamed out imprecations at the four survivors.

Captain Brading moved purposefully to his side. "What is wrong with you? Keep out of the way and let us help these men."

"These fellows are convicts! They cannot be allowed on English soil again!" Teague turned and screamed at the crowd.

Governor Fanshaw stepped forward, careful not to get his feet wet. He took hold of the irate captain's arm, "Let me help you to your rooms, sir. You could catch a nasty cold, even in this climate."

Teague stabbed a finger at Byzas. "Stop! Stop! Can you not see that he is a heathen? He is Moslem, and he cannot even understand our English! He is heathen, I tell you! And that one is a Jew, one of the breed who crucified Christ. He must not be allowed to step on English soil!"

A voice as of thunder came from the crowd as a black

preacher, Moses, spoke, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone." His white kinky hair reflected the pink glow of a rising sun while a formation of sea birds flew overhead. The minister held his arms aloft and intoned, "Come, my sons, be welcome."

Byzas looked first at Elijah Peck, not quite comprehending, then turned to Kurt. The three convicts moved toward the old black preacher.

Captain Brading kept pace with Byzas, who carried Billy, and a squad of soldiers brought up the rear of the little cavalcade.

Kurt's red-rimmed eyes absorbed everything as they made their way to the garrison. He was in Africa! Now he could see everything wonderful that Grandfather Roth had told him of the dark continent. He drew a deep breath of warm air. Africa!

Chapter Forty-Seven

For the first few weeks they were imprisoned in Freetown Barracks. Their quarters were small, and the cells were crowded. Kurt had time enough to think about Africa and what he knew of it.

He chuckled now as he remembered Captain Teague wading into the water, trying to keep them from "polluting the British soil of Africa." That was when he had first met the black preacher, Billy Moses. The man's booming voice had all but quieted the crashing waves of the Atlantic as he had shoved aside the captain and escorted the four men to the Army Barracks. As they moved along, he revealed something of the history of Sierra Leone—"the lion mountain"—and of man's attempts to wrest wealth from here in the form of slaves, gold, ivory, and spices. He also told them of the season of storms—where rain fell, not in drops but in waves that could knock a man flat. He looked at Byzas and Kurt. "It will crush a hut, and it will break a tree off at the roots. You'll hear thunder like you've never heard it before. Then between storms, you are chilled to the bone. That is followed by sweating heat. The sky will fill with flies and insects by day and mosquitoes and insects

by night. We natives seem immune to the disease that follows, but the graveyards are full of whites, both men and women."

The morning after their arrival, the men were lined up for the work detail. They marched two-by-two with their legs shackled together as they carried axes, saws, wedges, and hammers. A horse-drawn cart carried food supplies. Captain Brading led the little cavalcade on his black gelding. His horse was nervous and skittish, throwing his head up repeatedly.

It was early enough that the shops were still closed, but a few people were out on the walks, some of them in their elegant beaver hats and silk-ruffled shirts. They idly stopped to watch this little procession. Dogs ran alongside, occasionally barking. As they passed the Grog Shop, a woman above it stepped out onto the balcony. She wore nothing but a light silk kimono wrapped loosely around her. Her hair was bunched up on her head, leaving a few tendrils of curls to fall across her cheeks and smooth white forehead.

Captain Brading gave her a smart salute as he sat straight and tall in the saddle. The woman nodded at him, smiling, then she inspected the men in the chained gang.

She caught Kurt's eye as he looked up. Raising her dark head, her ruby lips formed his name. It was Molly, the convict girl, and he felt the color rise up in his face. All the men watched him.

The captain turned in his saddle to follow the woman's eyes. A dark anger flashed over his craggy features. Why he was just a boy!

Byzas, a few steps behind Kurt, saw the interchange of glances, and though he looked straight ahead, his black eyebrows were knitted together in a deep frown. No, the lad didn't need that kind of education.

The small cortege marched through a narrow road that had been cut through the swampland. Each side of the route was packed with mangroves. A stop was called after two hours of march. They all remained standing, though they were allowed a small drink of water from the small earthen flask that each man carried. Captain Brading dismounted from his horse, loosened the cinch strap, readjusted the blanket under the saddle, then took a drink from his own flask. He again tightened the strap

and remounted, then signalled the scout to move them all forward.

The road soon began to curve and to climb the foothills, and by lunch they had reached a high spot where they could look back over their trail to the distant town. By sundown, they had reached the "big timber" country. There were many trees—towering mahognay, ironwood, golden walnut, pearwood, and cottonwood, all with huge buttressed trunks. They were festooned with a hundred species of orchids. The forest floor was deeply shadowed, cool, and carpeted in brilliant green moss. Kurt looked around him in wonder. Was this the rain forest that his grandfather had told him about?

As the leg-irons were removed, the captain barked out orders and information. "For the benefit of you men who are new to this camp, the guards are posted to keep a lookout for marauding animals. There are elephants and pigmy hippos that don't look very small if they catch you out in the open. Then there are the chimpanzees, lions, leopards, and hostile natives.

"Now you may escape if you've a mind to take your chances. There isn't a thing that we can do about it. However, if you try to get back to the settlement, we'll shoot you. Of course you'll get killed if you go in any other direction, too. Now, insubordination is punishable by flogging. Laziness has the same result. But most of you will have red-shirts before we return to town." He looked lazily at the men. "Any questions?" There were none.

Small fires were lit and meals prepared as the night insects rose up from the warm damp ground and the swamps. The men crowded close to the smoky fires. The frogs croaked, announcing their enjoyment of evening. Kurt wrapped himself in the blanket that had been issued and stretched out on the ground. He listened to the monkeys as they chattered from their nests high up in the dense foliage. Africa! He had heard so many wonderful stories from grandfather, and now he was actually here! He fell asleep with a grin of contentment on his face.

In the weeks that followed, Byzas set the pace for Kurt, each of them trying to outdo the other. They worked as a team, cutting and trimming more than many of the other prisoners. Each evening, Kurt and Byzas did a bit of practice fighting. In this way the big Greek could teach the boy the finer points of

his ancient art as well as keep the young growing body well conditioned and fit. Byzas used only as much strength as he needed to beat young Kurt, and he felt the lad's endurance growing daily. Some of the other prisoners began to challenge Kurt. So far none had bested him. Byzas coached him before, during, and after each encounter, telling him what mistakes he made and what strengths to improve. There were but two rules—no weapons could be used and once a man was on his back, the fight was ended.

A few friendly natives joined the work party. They were fed and given a small pittance for their hours at hard demanding work. Kurt eagerly made their acquaintance. The younger men were soon teaching him their customs and methods of battle. It wasn't long before he was at least holding his own. Every day saw his expertise in native marksmanship and fighting grow. Some of the younger lads challenged Kurt and he lost several bouts with them until Byzas showed him how to match their skills.

Captain Brading watched the big Greek. His inner need to challenge the man grew. One day the captain stepped forward and pointed at Byzas.

"It is you that I would face."

For the first time since he had known him, Kurt saw a look of unrestrained excitement in Byzas' face.

The two big men faced each other. They moved sideways with their arms outstretched, eyes locked, and fingers stiffly open. They crashed like two huge hippos and tufts of moss were chewed up by their feet. Each of them sought an advantage over the other, but it was the captain who found the hold that enabled him to pivot and throw the big Greek over his hip and onto the grass. Byzas hit like a tumbler, rolling immediately onto his feet. Now it was his turn to charge at his opponent. He was met with a vicious punch that barely missed his chin and caught him in the neck. This time the captain was off-balance just long enough for Byzas to turn throw the staggering officer onto the ground. The Captain was quick to regain his feet, but not quite as quick as his opponent. As he gained his balance again, the captain rushed toward Byzas to be met with a hard right-hand blow. It caught the officer on the side of his jaw, and he staggered backwards.

From the shadows a voice yelled, "Hit 'im again, hit 'im again!" The voice had echoed Kurt's own thoughts. Why was Byzas waiting? This was his chance to end the fight. But the strongman slowly stepped forward, then feigned a punch. The captain threw up a protective arm and Byzas ducked under it and got a body hold, then raised his opponent up and across his shoulders.

Kurt had once seen Byzas hold four hundred pounds over his head, and yet now he was unable to raise up the captain. He seemed to trip, and then fell over backwards with Brading on top of him. While he was recovering his breath, the captain rolled to his feet, and with a confident air, he raised his foot and struck down at Byzas face with the hobnailed heel of his guard boot. Byzas grabbed the bootheel in midair and gave it a twist and a shove that sent the captain stumbling into the circle of yelling men.

As Brading turned, his opponent staggered slowly toward him and Kurt suddenly realized that Byzas could have destroyed him—broken his arms and legs, jabbed out an eye, torn off an ear. Though he was making a fight the officer would remember, he would let the big captain win.

The fight had lasted over an hour. Finally, the Greek did not rise again to his feet. At last the captain turned and went to wash his bloodied hands and face. Though every muscle in his big body was swollen and racked with pain he gave no sign of misery as the men stared until he disappeared into the gloomy darkness of his quarters.

Byzas slowly got to his feet. He ignored the hand that Kurt held out to him, washed, then sat down to his waiting meal of boiled rice with palm oil. Kurt's mind was churning with the question as to why Byzas had let Brading win. He was disappointed. The big Greek had symbolized what he would have liked to be.

Meantime, the captain sat in his quarters with a plate of untouched food before him. His mind was troubled. Again he went through each detail of the painful, punishing fight. The Greek had tremendous strength, and several times he had felt himself losing, then the man would let the advantage slip away. He felt unsettled, for his victory was not complete. And the

men had all remained silent at the finish of the bout. Finally the realization came forcibly into his mind. He had lost the fight!

Today was a Sunday, and but for a few necessary chores, it would be a day of leisure. Kurt and Byzas made their way to a favorite nearby pool. The trees were dripping with rain, and little rivulets of water raced toward the swamps that housed hordes of insects. The two men carried the only weapon they were allowed; a heft piece of ironwood shaved down to grip size at the handle. Before diving into the water, they sparred and battled with their staves. Kurt doubted that anyone could match the strength and skill of Byzas, yet he tried—receiving bruised shins, lumps on the shoulders and head, sore ribs and the mashed fingers that were part of this hard schooling. Byzas pushed Kurt to use his utmost skill and strength but never enough to discourage him. He even allowed the boy to give him a few wallops to encourage his efforts. Now they sparred for a half hour and then plunged into the water. Kurt was startled by the appearance of a pair of eyes staring at them through the jungle cover, and they raced naked from the pool to the protective cover of the trees with water streaming from their sun-blackened bodies. They raced for their weapons, only to discover the native was the preacher, Billy Moses. They followed him back to camp, where they also found Elijah Peck.

"Happy Birthday, lad," Elijah yelled, drawing the boy to where he had hidden a present for Kurt's eighteenth birthday. "Ye are not old enough and strong-like to handle such a weapon as this, boy."

During the time in Africa, Elijah had taught Kurt the use of the longbow, and now the boy fondled his very own. He lifted it to his shoulder and Elijah's eyes danced with pleasure at the thought that his young pupil had exceeded his teacher's skill. His long sombre face broke into a big smile.

"I hope that this may do for you what you did for me, lad." He gripped Kurt's shoulder with his big bony hand. "I can never forget that you gave up your freedom to save me, lad. Perhaps this will save your life one day, at least it will give you pleasure. We shall all be in Australia one day—soon, pray God. There we will be pardoned to work on the farms. Eventually we will be given our own land. I hope that we can

do it together, Kurt—and Byzas too, if he will come with us. After all, we have been here nearly a year, and with our time aboard ship, we are all permitted pardons."

"For you an Englishman, maybe, but for me, a Jew and Byzas, a Moslem, I think there is small hope in that direction."

Billy Moses came to bid them goodbye. He then went among the men, gripping their hands and leaving his blessing. He picked up his pack, tucked his Bible into it, and started on his way. Kurt stood beside Byzas and they looked after him with surprise. The preacher was not taking the road back to Freetown. He was taking a trail that led deep into the dark foreboding jungle. They saw him stop and speak to two natives who had butchered carcasses slung over their shoulders. It looked like an argument. Finally Elijah turned and walked over to listen.

He returned to the camp at a jog and walked quickly over to Kurt and Byzas. He was excited, "The natives caught the game a mile or so up the trail and said they saw a leopard earlier. Billy wouldn't stop, said the Lord would protect him on his journey."

"Where is he going?" asked Kurt. Elijah shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know."

Kurt looked at Byzas. Neither man spoke. Kurt took his new bow with the quiver of arrows and Byzas took his stave. The two companions moved at a fast pace following the preacher's trail. He needed them. They caught up with him shortly and he greeted them with a hand raised in blessing.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Kurt was the first to realize that they were being followed. Even though he had been in the jungle only a short time, he was becoming attuned to its sounds and feeling. His eyes searched among the limbs of trees and back along their trail. In the leaves of a huge cork oak, he met the gaze of a native warrior, and he saw and felt hostility in the dark, obsidian gaze. Billy Moses suddenly called out a greeting. The man raised his hand in answer and his lips parted in a welcoming grin. He swung down from his lofty perch to join them.

"My people have been taken as slaves for many years now. We have no natural defenses, and we are subject to attack from any quarter. A man like this is our only defense against raids, for he can give adequate warnings so our people can hide in the jungles." Moses' voice was sad. "Remember I was chased and caught, then sold into slavery."

"How many years since you were captured, my friend?" Kurt asked.

"It's been over twenty years. I would be in Nova Scotia now except for Lord Jeffrey and his associates in London who

provided the money for British slaves to return here to our homeland."

Kurt grasped his arm. "Did you say Lord Jeffrey?"

"Yes. Lord Jeffrey knew of our escape to Nova Scotia following the American War of Independence. We were destitute, and so he made arrangements to bring us back to our homeland. But for most of us, too many years had gone by, and there were changes in our tribes. Lord Jeffrey thought we could use skills we had learned in civilization to develop our own economy and that we could eventually repay him. However we have been here for more than four years now, and we have been unable to send him a single shilling. Lord Jeffrey did a noble thing for my people, but so far it has been a financial failure. Still, we are determined to make it pay—one day."

Kurt's mind was whirling with memories. He recalled that other life when he had stood before Lord Jeffrey and his two daughters. What were their names—? The young impetuous one had been called Megan, but the other . . . ? He could not seem to recall. His thoughts were so deep that he failed to see the band of warriors until they were suddenly surrounded.

Kurt glanced at Byzas who stood with controlled ease holding his stave. His own bow and arrows were slung carelessly over his shoulder, and he felt faintly disconcerted at being caught unprepared. He listened without understanding as Moses talked rapidly in his own dialect to the excited leader. There was anger in the native's voice and Kurt wondered what the problem was.

At last Moses explained. "He says that I am welcome, but that white men bring curses to his people. You will remain here while I go to the village and get the chief's permission to bring you. They say no harm will come to you if you remain quiet. My friends, I cannot return until tomorrow, but you should be safe until my return."

"What if the chief will not welcome us?"

"Then you had best return to Freetown, and rapidly. There is no trail open for you if he decides that you are dangerous. You will be lucky to escape with your lives—if you are sufficiently expert to escape the hunters."

Moses left, and ten natives stayed to guard Kurt and Byzas. There was a whispered conversation among the native warri-

ors, and Byzas spoke softly to Kurt in Greek. "They have seen slavers on the trail."

One man was sent ahead to warn the village. "I wish they had told Moses," the Greek said.

One of the young men dropped back to jog beside Kurt. "My name Dobi," he said in reasonably good English. He pointed at Kurt's English bow and motioned him to follow.

Kurt glanced at Byzas and the big man nodded his agreement. It was all that Kurt could do to keep up with Dobi, and he was amazed at the young warrior's skill at finding paths in what seemed impenetrable jungle. Kurt's eyes searched the trees for snakes and wild beasts as they ran. Often Dobi would hold up his hand and stand still, then he would drop to the ground and place his ear to listen. Satisfied, he would rise swiftly and take off again. Kurt's face began to smart from the whiplashes of tree branches and scratches from the brush. Powdery dust from huge plant leaves began to sting the breaks in his skin. Dobi slowed their progress to walk carefully so as not to disturb the wildlife around them and alert the enemy. They made detours around areas that might be raider lookout posts.

At last they came to an open area of cork oaks and the native motioned Kurt to move silently. Soon they were both well hidden. But from what? He could not understand Dobi's concern. Still this was his country and he should know. They waited quietly for several long minutes and suddenly he heard the soft voices of men speaking English. Kurt still could not see them. At last their voices faded and Dobi pointed toward a black native. Judging by his war paint, he knew that the man was from a different tribe. Dobi's look inquired if Kurt could notch his arrow to his bow with good effect.

Kurt nodded briefly, but the man disappeared behind a clump of brush, and he thought that his chance for a shot was gone. He was about to lower his bow when the man reappeared. Kurt's arrow found its mark and the native dropped out of sight.

Kurt had never before taken a human life, and his legs trembled. He had hated with violent passion, but to drive the soul from a human was a new experience.

Coming up to the brow of the hill, the lad was stunned at what he saw. The native was stretched out in the grass with an arrow protruding from his back. A fly had already landed and was settling on the puckered skin around the shaft. With the point of his spear, Dobi was cutting the arrow loose, and then with a reverent sigh of admiration, handed it back to Kurt.

Suddenly Dobi's head came up, and he was off and running silently, taking long steps as he raced down the slope. Kurt followed, but Dobi had disappeared. The thought crossed Kurt's mind that he was abandoned and lost. Suppose other members of that tribe found the dead man and tracked him to this lair—to find the bloody arrow on him.

Kurt wondered if he could find Byzas' trail. It occurred to him that they'd been better off at the prison camp. Elijah had been sure they would soon get passage to Australia, that there would be a pardon in time, and land. Eventually he could get back to London, and his mother and Granpa Roth.

Kurt heard a twig snap and braced himself to meet whatever was to follow. It was Dobi, he motioned Kurt to follow him. For the next two hours, the boy had the greatest test of endurance that he had ever yet experienced. Now all caution was gone as Dobi jumped over fallen logs, splashed through infested waters, ran past crawling snakes, and fought his way through trailing vines. They scrambled up steep banks, leaped dry washes and ran down paths until, finally, Byzas came into view with the other warriors. They were in a circle, all talking at once. They rose and came toward Dobi, who spoke rapidly for a moment, then they looked at Kurt and broke into laughing chatter.

"What was that all about?" Byzas asked.

Kurt told of the trail they had followed, and the gorge rose in his throat as he spoke of his killing.

Byzas seemed to know what was going on in his young friend's mind. "Think nothing of it, boy. Forget it. He deserved to die."

Dobi stood up and took a few quick steps to Kurt's side. In a language as old as time, with gestures and expressions, he

asked that Kurt and Byzas accompany him in attacking the slavers' advance party.

As they sped through the jungle trails with the sweat running down their backs, Kurt pondered the words of his friend. He watched the broad back of Byzas, his size dwarfing the natives who went beside him. Dobi led, and though they were moving rapidly, they took every precaution against ambush. The dead man would be missed, but hopefully not before they made contact with the scouting party.

Gradually Kurt became aware that the forest had a damp smell, that moss was beneath his feet, and the high trees roofed them in a greenish gloom. Kurt knew that Dobi was not following the trail of the slavers, but was taking a shorter route to save time. This was a place of terrors filled somehow with mystery. He noticed the nervous glances of the warriors as they penetrated territory where the wild beasts could easily charge their ranks, for many leopards filled this jungle.

It was past midday when they emerged into the open grassland and tension seemed relieved. Kurt's mind focused on thoughts of food. He had been able to satisfy thirst at a stream, but now his belly needed more.

A hand signal from Dobi told the group their enemy was spotted, for they could see nothing. Kurt felt a sudden trembling in his body; not of fear, but of excitement. Dobi motioned Kurt to follow him to an outcropping of rocks where brush grew up from the crevices to make a perfect screen for them.

Kurt had to control a gasp at the sight of the noisy camp of men below and his attention riveted on two young girls whose wrists were tied behind their backs. They wore only skirts, and their long hair hung down over their backs and over their shoulders, but not enough to conceal their pointed young breasts. In the shadows of the bordering trees a group of natives were tied together in groups. They watched two white men who were tantalizing the two young women who crouched from them in fear. A sense of anxiety traveled through Kurt's mind, and he stirred with restlessness. He pulled two arrows from his quiver, handing one to Dobi, and fitting the other to his bow. He would kill the two white slavers! He drew the bow back toward his ear and let the arrow fly.

Kurt watched the missile soar as though it was in slow motion. At the twang of its release, one of the hostile natives spotted him and raised an arm in warning. As one of the white men reached out a sunburned arm to touch a captive girl, the arrow imbedded itself in his chest. He staggered back, tried to grasp the shaft, and his mouth gaped open in a silent scream.

A warning was shouted and the enemy natives ran for cover. Another arrow followed closely from Kurt's bow.

Within seconds the camp was cleared of everyone but the trembling girls and a dead man with a feathered arrow pointing upward to the bright blue skies.

Kurt ran swiftly behind Dobi to see that Byzas and his men were running after the slavers. A great roar came up from the forest and Kurt knew that the Greek was making short work of those within his grasp. As Kurt came within sight of them, he saw that indeed it was over except for the escaping white man. The strongman raised him from the ground by the hair and held him down with his foot. The man was stoutly built with a coarse and brutal face that showed the brutality of his years trading in slaves. Now the man jerked free to swing a powerful punch at Byzas. Kurt saw his friend break into a hearty laugh as he opened his arms and let the blow glance off his rock-hard chin, then he reached out and enfolded the man in his arms. The awed natives heard the cracking of ribs—the man opened his mouth to give a muffled scream before he fainted. Byzas then dropped him and walked away.

The two girls were now cut loose from their bonds, and they dropped to their knees in thanks. Kurt was embarrassed, and a short word from Dobi brought them to their feet. Dobi turned and called out orders, and the jubilant tribesmen released the other captives, hoisted packs to their shoulders, as they started again toward their home village.

They arrived after dark amid the cheerful greetings of their families. There was shouting and soon the confusion turned to building the fires and the roasting of meat. Dancing and stomping began as the rescue of the captives made the rounds again and again.

Preacher Moses found Byzas and Kurt. He grasped their hands in his. "You are indeed welcome here—as friends," he said.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Early morning cooking odors that he could not identify woke Kurt as they permeated the air of the grass hut. He glanced over and saw that Byzas had gone from his bed, but several other natives were still asleep on their mats. He stretched languidly, thinking that it must be close to a month since they had arrived at this village, a month filled with new learning and interest. Now he raised up on his elbow and looked over the low partition where he could see the thatched roofs glistening like silver in the first rays of the sun. Lazily he watched the sway of the girls' hips as they walked gracefully to the well carrying the large calabashes balanced on their heads. Once in a while an arm would go up to steady the load on her head and thus her breast would lift and emphasize the beauty of her nearly naked body.

Kurt's thoughts sharpened as the girl known as Tamarji joined the group, laughing her morning greeting. He watched intently as his loins responded to the sight of her. He had wondered at her lighter skin until Byzas explained her Spanish and Moorish heritage. She walked like a princess, but then her

mother was the matriarch of the Folah tribe. She was kind and gentle, yet energetic as to the affairs of the village and a good mother and housewife. She was proud, yet gracious, always severely demanding in regard to the traditions and laws of the tribe. She proudly ruled, a right that descended down each generation through the women—for it was through them that life was given to men.

Tamarji was sixteen and unaffected in her beauty. She enjoyed the comforts and restrictions of her good home and the respect of her friends. She had the sweet confidence of her years and with shy eyes, she was capable of little flirtations. When Kurt looked at her, he became exquisitely aware of his burgeoning manhood—and it was becoming an awareness that he knew he must now control.

Kurt looked up to see Billy Moses coming toward them carrying his worn black Bible. "Kurt, tomorrow I return to Freetown, for I must not stay away from my people there any longer. You and Byzas are welcome to come with me. I will give a favorable report on how you helped against the slavers. I have some influence with Captain Brading and the governor. My son, there is much to be said for return. One day you will be able to walk in freedom—when you have earned your pardon. You will then be able to begin to build your life among your own people. You are welcome to stay here, but there will always be the threat of recapture hanging over you. You will then have to complete your sentence before you can return to life. Think well, my son, before you decide your path."

Kurt nodded and told Byzas. The big Greek listened quietly, then said, "I will stay here, little friend. It is you who must decide your own path."

But Moses turned to them and said quietly, "You cannot stay here. The queen does not want you to remain. She hears that you are bringing trouble to her daughter and thus to her people. Dobi argues that you and Byzas have proved your courage and strength. He says that you will help our people learn to defend themselves against our enemies."

Impatiently Byzas turned back to the preacher. "Tell her we leave before sundown."

Moses raised his eyebrows, "You return with me?"

Byzas vigorously shook his head, "Not me!"

Dobi came to stand beside Byzas and Kurt. "My white brothers, I know the trails and the ways of the forest. I will lead you wherever you go, for I am your brother."

Byzas shrugged his massive shoulders, took a deep breath, then he turned to Kurt. "Lad? Do you go with the preacher Moses? Or do you walk my path? It seems you cannot stay here."

"We stay together—as always, Greek."

Byzas turned to Moses. "Tell them we go." He turned to Dobi, "We accept your offer. Good men can wrest treasure from the fabled city. We go to Timbuctoo!"

Murmurs went up from the men. All had proved their courage in many ways—the killing of leopards, snakes, crocodiles, lions—but no one had yet dared to enter the fabled city and return. It was certain cruel death.

Kurt glanced at Dobi. The young warrior had made a boastful promise, but now it was as though he had received a death sentence. There was no honorable way out of it, and Kurt saw him draw his dignity around him. "I go," he said. "I would die among men."

With ample provisions the three men swung onto the trail. Kurt glanced back for one last glance and saw the girl Tamarji standing next to her mother. He met her eyes, and this time they did not lower modestly as she met his look. With lifted heart, Kurt swung to follow his friends' footsteps. He would succeed and bring back something of worth to the girl's mother. Yes, he would prove himself a man.

A year passed and Dobi and Byzas and Kurt came down the same path into the village. There were no changes and there was still hostility in the eyes of the matriarch. But the weary travelers were indeed welcome.

Kurt's eyes searched for Tamarji, and he saw her standing near her sister. Kurt's eyes widened as he saw that the older girl was with child. His eyes silently wondered if Tamarji was also married. His eyes went again to the distended stomach of Dejmona, and a tall handsome young warrior moved to stand behind the girl. Kurt grinned in a look of congratulation, and then his thought quickened, for he was very aware of her maturity. Her naked breasts showed the promise of the future

needs of child. Her hips had widened, and she would give birth to her children as nature intended. The mirth in her eyes as she met his look showed warmth and excitement and little lights played mischievously in her eyes as though listening to his thoughts.

Kurt felt the eyes of the others on him, and his face went red with embarrassment. He forced his eyes away from the girl. Everyone wanted to hear the stories of the years' adventures.

"We were not prepared," Byzas' big voice boomed out. "We could not penetrate the walls of Timbuctoo, but at least we know the preparations we must make for our next exploit. We will try again."

Questions and answers kept coming. News from outside the village was scarce and it was not until the early hours of morning that the people were willing to let the travelers go to their sleeping mats in the longhouse.

As Kurt rested, he remembered the ripened loveliness of Tamarji. He had thought of her occasionally during the year he had been gone, but now! In his mind he saw her beautiful body, bare to the waist, swaying in the rhythms of song as the women worked.

Dobi had taught him of the tribal sacredness of a girl's body, that she must remain worthy to enfold God's creation, a child. He had learned that, by tribal law, she was sealed up and only her husband would break the seal. He knew that if any were to despoil her, she would be disgraced, as would her whole family. Even if this act remained undiscovered until her wedding, it would become known then. The marriage would end and it would be her duty to name the man who had committed such an act. She would then be banished from the tribe.

For him, a man, there was the tribal saying that applied to love and to war, and to the hunt. He remembered it well, for Dobi had quoted it often, "The hunter that throws his spear too soon does not live to throw again." Yes, he knew of the threat implicit in the statement.

In the days that followed, Kurt continued the project that Billy Moses had started of putting on paper the written language of the tribesmen. Kurt worked with the preacher tirelessly. In the meantime, Byzas was making progress with

the building of a stockade, and the queen was delighted that her people would have protection against the slavers.

As the days of Dejmona's delivery approached, the family's excitement grew, and gradually Kurt became aware that the queen had a deep concern for her daughter. The midwives of the village did what they could and the witch doctor made his incomprehensible offerings in the accepted pattern. Kurt noticed that Tamarji stayed constantly by her sister's side.

One morning the excitement was more tense than usual, the child would soon lie born, possibly within hours. This was the first occasion in Kurt's life that he had been close to a human delivery and he sensed the eagerness of those around him.

"She will be all right, won't she, Dobi?"

The dark warrior shrugged his broad shoulders, "The price of pain must be paid for a new life. Sometimes the price is too high for a girl to endure, but the matters of life and death are beyond us. The Alamani, the high priest, has already been called for little Dejmona. He will prepare her soul for its journey to the tribal dead."

Kurt suddenly realized that the beautiful girl was not expected to survive the birth. His eyes went to the stalwart young man who stood rigidly at one side, his jaw muscles held tight to show no emotion. And then Kurt saw his eyes and knew that he was at the outer limits of his self-control. Kurt looked around him as all work ceased and the tribal members sat in silence. Even the wind is waiting, Kurt thought. Would it be a new life? Or will there be only the desolation of death? He watched as the queen looked up into the darkening skies of evening as though she was looking for a sign, an omen.

From within a nearby hut came a high screaming voice of pain. The shrill cry was akin to the death scream of an animal as it gives up its life.

The hair rose on the back of Kurt's neck. From deep within the village the drums began to speak slowly, and Kurt felt their vibrations reach out to touch his very soul. He understood how those around him could sway back and forth to the rhythm of the soft thudding, and how uncontrollable were their tears and cries. The death chant was heard throughout the village.

Dazed Kurt watched as immediate preparations were made for burial—first a small one for the placenta. The witch doctor

went about his duties with great care as he dug a hole in the sacred ground.

"The navel cord that tied the child to the womb, is also the buried cord ties the child to mother earth." The witch doctor went down to his knees and placed the placenta in the open grave. The sorrow drums became louder as the whole village moved to the larger open grave, the one that would take the beautiful Dejmona.

Kurt and Byzas watched from a short distance. The Greek turned and went to his quarters, and Kurt turned toward the forest where he could no longer see sadness. The slow beating of the drums followed him, bringing pain to his own heart.

Kurt carried his bow and arrow with him to the jungle. He was at home in this environment now, for a year with Dobi on the hunt had taught him well of the wilderness ways. Now his practised eyes took in everything unconsciously, the sounds, the smells, and the sights which all had their own significance. No detail was too unimportant to be ignored. He heard the answering drums from faraway villages. There was a sense of danger. The drums had caused him to be careless, and though his mind had warned him, he had not responded.

It took but a moment for his mind's eye to see the bit of crushed grass made by a bare foot. Now the truth struck him like a bow—it was not a manmade print. It was the foot of a doomboo. An ape! He bent to touch the crushed blades of grass. Lustful male apes will attack women and girls. Realizing where the doomboo was heading he jumped from cover and headed back to warn the village.

As he left the dense forest and entered the clearing, he came within sight of the many thatched huts. Most of the people were gathered around Dejmona's grave. Kurt was looking for Byzas when he saw Tamarji's frightened face. She was running from the house where her sister had died. As she saw Kurt, she ran toward him, calling out, "The new baby is gone and the nurse is lying in a pool of blood."

Kurt looked down at the unmistakable footprint of a male doomboo—it was pointed away from the village! "Warn the others!" he ordered the girl as he swiftly turned to follow the ape.

Tamarji's mind was filled with confusion. She knew that she

must call out for help, and yet Kurt was going alone. He would need help. Perhaps they could bring the child back before it was missed. It would be better not to disturb her mother at the graveside. Swiftly she turned to follow.

Kurt reached the edge of the forest and Tamarji was falling behind. Fearing that she would lose sight of him, she called out. He turned and his face was momentarily flushed with anger. As she ran toward him his heart softened. He reached out to enclose her in his arms as they entered the jungle. She dropped behind him as the trail narrowed, but he held her hand whenever possible.

"Kurt—" she said, but he put his finger to his lips. She understood. They must not alert the ape to their presence. There were only a few hours of daylight left to them, so they must move with speed and caution.

In less than an hour Kurt found tracks near a stream. He helped Tamarji to cross the water, his eyes searching the foliage for signs of deadly snakes.

They came upon the doomboo sooner than Kurt had expected. He heard grunts from the branches of a huge mangrove tree and seeing the ape, he quickly searched for signs of the baby.

Kurt notched an arrow to his bowstring. If it were possible to take the child and leave, that is what they must do. To attempt a kill could prove disastrous, for the ape was not exposed enough for a fatal shot. The big animal, seated deep in the limbs of the tree, watched them with malevolent hatred in his little beady eyes. His thin lips were pulled back in a vicious snarl. Kurt wished that Byzas was here and that Tamarji was safe at home.

He kept the girl close to him as he slowly made his way to the other side of the tree. As he moved closer, the ape became bold and prepared to descend. A mere man and woman meant nothing to him. People like these always ran in terror. Kurt moved about until the huge beast's chest presented a clear target.

He aimed at a black inverted nipple. The arrow struck with a dull thunk, but missed the mark, entering the great body below the collarbone. Kurt sent another missile swiftly, but the ape swung behind a branch and the arrow buried itself in a tree

limb. The animal screamed out his pain and rage, then jerked the arrow contemptuously from his powerful chest.

Tamarji sank to her knees, not only because of fright and weakness, but also to enable Kurt to move freely, unhampered by her presence. Kurt, however, was well aware of her, and though he wanted to save the child, his heart told him clearly that the girl was his first concern.

The ape was keeping the tree between himself and his enemy as he swung to the ground. He suddenly charged at Kurt and ran straight into an arrow. Kurt had found his mark at last! The boy dodged the doomboo's rush and saw his bared yellow teeth and red gaping mouth pass by. The ape's big hairy arm crashed against Kurt's chest, and he fell back as though hit by a tree limb.

Tamarji was staring white-faced at the great beast as hairy muscles shuddered and quivered in death. After only a moments' hesitation they were both searching for the baby. Kurt desperately wanted to be the first to find the child, for he feared that she might be dead. As though nature was conspiring against them, the wind had picked up and the first drops of rain filtered down through the dense foliage overhead. The drums could still be heard above the sound of the winds, but the forest animals were stilled. Vultures started to gather overhead, and crawling things were beginning to explore the inert animal body, preparing to remove the signs of death from their land. By morning the few remaining bones would be chewed up by the iron-jawed hyenas.

Kurt heard a cry from Tamarji and ran to her side. She held the baby, a delicate mite with its eyes pinched shut, mouth pursed in a cry, and restless hands. The girl looked up at Kurt and smiled tremulously. "She is hungry."

The storm, as if waiting for the baby to be found, now broke loose in full fury. Kurt wrapped his arms around them and raced toward a cave. Inside, it was dry and cool, and offered protection from the rain.

"What about food for the baby?" Tamarji asked quietly.

Kurt suddenly raised his hand for silence and they both heard the message drums. They understood that hunters were being sent out to find the baby and to take the ape.

The rain lasted long, and they could not now reach the

village before darkness covered the land. At the first break in the storm Kurt carried the baby and took Tamarji's hand. He led them down the stream bed to an abandoned shanty built into the side of the riverbank.

The lean-to was barely usable, and Kurt cleaned it out to be sure that it was safe. At last he handed the baby in to Tamarji, and she cuddled the naked little infant close against her bare body.

Kurt prepared to leave her, for he had seen tracks in the soft mud by the stream. He now had a plan. "Do not leave here, for I will not be far. I will return soon."

Tamarji's eyes spoke in protest, and yet he must do what was best for them. She nodded.

As he walked along, Kurt whittled an arrow until the end was blunt. He had seen the tracks of many antelopes. He meant to have one. It was close to sundown, and animals must drink. Thus hunters wait by the pools, and the hunted go cautiously knowing the risk as well as the need. It required much patience, and unfortunately Kurt did not have the time. He found a well-used trail and kept downwind. Soon he came to the grazing grounds. He hung his shirt on a limb then backed into the deep shadows nearby to wait.

It was an ancient trick. Kurt did not have long to wait. First a buck came tentatively forward, then a doe and a fawn. Kurt let an arrow fly. The buck heard the twang of the bow, jumped into the air and disappeared into the brush as the doe fell stunned to the ground. The fawn began to follow the buck, then he turned and waited for his mother. He was startled, but did not bolt as Kurt ran forward. The boy trussed the doe's feet together, with vines. His blunted arrow had hit the doe in the forehead, and Kurt knew that she would only be unconscious for a few minutes.

Kurt looked alertly around him, and then lifted the doe over his shoulder. The fawn, confused, remained nearby. Soon Kurt arrived back at the shanty. He tied the doe securely to a sapling. Tamarji was wide-eyed and curious. What could this white man with the hair of fire be doing now? Kurt grinned.

"I am getting food for the baby. Isn't that what you want?"

The girl covered her mouth to hide her smile. Yes, this big man would take care of them.

The fawn nestled down close to its mother and was about to suck when Kurt moved it gently away. The doe tried to butt Kurt and then to kick at him. Laughing aloud, he dodged the flailing hoof and then laid a hand on her. She quivered under his touch, but he scratched her back and ears. Soon she quietened. Now he cut a piece of leather from his quiver and folded it into a cup.

Scratching the doe's back, he moved his hand down to gently touch her udder. She kicked and shied away from him. Using his shoulder against her sides to hold her in place, Kurt soon extracted some milk from her with his thumb and forefinger. Carefully he took the liquid to Tamarji who was trying to comfort the whimpering infant.

As he came toward her, she lay down on her side, cuddling the child close to her breast. She opened the baby's mouth with her finger and Kurt let a few drops run out from one side of the leather cup. The baby sucked at her fingers as Kurt held the container of milk carefully and let it drip into the little puckered mouth. There wasn't very much but she drank it all and was soon contentedly asleep.

Kurt glanced at the doe. The firelight reflected the big brown eyes as she watched the wiggling white tail of her fawn as he ate his delayed meal. "I'll take the little one away from her in a minute or two, and then in another hour or so I can milk her again." There was no answer and Kurt turned to see that the Tamarji was engrossed in watching her sister's baby snuggled close to her own bare breast.

Kurt went to the doe and scratched her back, talking in a soft voice to calm her.

"Never fear, little mother. I'll take care of you. Your milk is saving the life of the next Queen of the Folahs."

Tamarji held her hand out to Kurt. He came to sit beside her. Seeing her lying there with the child close in her arms gave him a sense of protectiveness. It made him feel very masculine, and yet empty. The child was not of his making. He had no right to this sense of possessiveness. Neither of them belonged to him in any way. He was alone in this great continent of thousands of miles and thousands of people. He neither belonged to anyone nor did anyone belong to him.

A hand crept into his and he peered into the shadows. He heard her gasp, though did not know why.

"What is it, Tamarji?" he demanded.

The girl did not know how to answer the insistent question, and he was not able to see that the little child had found the small nipple on her bare breast and was sucking vigorously. It was a sensation that Tamarji had never experienced before. It tightened her loins and ran shivers up her back and she was embarrassed at the emotions she was experiencing. She recovered and drew away from the child.

Kurt felt concern, wondering if she had been bitten by a lethal spider. He turned her with rough hands so that he could better see her. His eyes went to the small hands as they caressed the full satin breasts and his own loins curled with desire.

"The baby is hungry again, Kurt," her voice was soft and shy. "Can you get her more milk now? She has sucked your little skin cup dry."

In the darkness Kurt reached out and took the small leather pouch. Again he made a cup to catch the milk, and soon had it filled again. He moved back into the cave and leaned against the girl to help feed the infant.

He turned to build up the fire then again turned back to Tamarji. He only saw the glint of her eyes as she looked up at him in thanks and her gleaming white teeth in the firelight as she smiled at him. He removed his shirt and wrapped it around her naked shoulders.

"The baby is asleep now. I will wrap her in your garment and fix her away from us so that she can sleep peacefully, said the girl. Come close to me, my friend, for without your shirt you will be cold. We need the warmth of each other this night."

Kurt lay on his side and she curled sweetly against him. He did not dare to put his arm across her waist. He wished fervently for more self-control, a quality which he had spent years developing. He accepted that he would never sleep this night, for her presence was both delicious and disturbing. Her long black hair hung between them and the scent of her hair and body wrung his vitals with deep curling emotions.

There was a scream from a jungle cat. The huge animal was

angry for he could see his waiting victims, but there was also the hated man smell as well as the fire. His great eyes glowed with furious intensity.

At the sound of the scream, Tamarji turned into Kurt's arms and buried her head against his bare chest. His hand moved across the velvet satin of her breast. Emotion engulfed him and he pulled her closer into his arms, his lips seeking hers as his hands moved to bring her closer and closer to him. It was in the solitude of the grasslands and the flickering light of the campfire that the little child slept, and a boy and girl became man and woman.

Unbeknownst to them, Dobi sat near the outer rim of the fire. He found the dead ape, and tracked the pair to the shanty. He knew that Kurt would save the baby and the girl. Then he saw the doe tied to the post and he had smiled.

Yes, the Jew was a smart man. Was it possible for Kurt, who was from another world, and Tamarji to find a lasting life together? The laws of his people were strict, and Kurt knew of those laws—and yet he was breaking them. Would their excuses be valid under these circumstances? He shrugged his shoulders.

These were new times, modern times. Perhaps it would work out. Dobi tossed another stick on the fire.

Chapter Fifty

Message drums carried the good news through the jungles as Tamarji walked into the village carrying the baby. Men and boys followed the little procession and Dobi told the excited group about the rescue.

"Doomboo! Doomboo!" he said. "The great fearsome ape has been killed by the white brother."

The queen hurried toward her daughter and embraced her. The tearful laughter turned to crooning as she lifted up her granddaughter. The matriarch then turned to Kurt with a tremulous smile. "We shall ever be in your debt, my son."

Byzas came to stand between Kurt and Tamarji, and he put an arm across their shoulders, drawing them apart from the crowd around them.

"I must hear each detail of your experience, my children. It would be well to give your story to me before the keen ears of your mother hears it, Tamarji. She is already suspicious, and will listen carefully to each inflection of your words. Come we will walk and we will speak."

When the three returned later, they heard the loud voice of

the preacher. "God has appointed the day, and He has commanded men everywhere to repent."

The words entered Kurt's mind like fire. He had never known the need for repentance before. First he had killed a man and now he had broken another commandment. His eyes went to Tamarji, wondering if his love would justify his violation of their law of chastity. Was he thus a common sinner?

If their lovemaking was proved, Tamarji would be banished from her tribe. He was not sure of his own fate, possible death, but certainly banishment. He straightened his shoulders. Somehow, he must protect little Tamarji, convince her mother that she was safe with him. He turned his thoughts back to Moses' words.

Byzas let out a deep breath of relief. He had best get Kurt away from the village for a few days.

The following morning Byzas and Kurt followed Dobi and Moses. The village had need of more tools and seed.

Their trip to a neighboring settlement was uneventful except for one report that a fairly large expedition had landed north of Freetown and embarked on a journey to find the fabled city of Timbuctoo, and that they were also combing the country for slaves. This was not unusual, for the white man and the black Moors used slaves as trade goods. There was a steady demand for young men and women. A small core of worry settled on Kurt, for he knew that Tamarji and her people were yet defenseless against a strong party of slavers.

On the last night they were together, Preacher Moses declared, "I just don't believe all that I've heard about Timbuctoo—houses with gold roofs, priceless manuscripts, untold wisdom. Bah! Those are all tales to excite men's fancy and bring them to their death."

Kurt's eyes shone at the thought of the fabled city. "We were actually in sight of it on the river."

Byzas grunted, "I go again after we warn of the slavers coming. Do you go with me, Jew?"

"Yes. I also wish to enter the walls of the city to find wealth." He thought of all that it would do—yes—perhaps even gain proof of his innocence.

The preacher's voice droned, "Do you go because of

courage—romantic fantasy—adventure? Or is it possible that you think to find things of real value?"

Kurt answered firmly, "I would go for riches. I would help your people, Moses, as well as my own. There is much that could be done for them. I would wish to see your village prosper."

"Perhaps, Or could it be that your head is turned by your heart? For the girl's sake I hope that you have kept your emotions in hand."

Kurt flushed, grateful that the shadows of night could hide evidence of his guilt. He felt no remorse for his lovemaking with Tamarji. In fact, he knew he would take her again. Yes, his emotions were claimed by her responsiveness and shy surrender. Thinking now of her softness under his hands brought a quickening of his pulse. He had heard men refer to "petticoat affairs" as the right of every young man. Well, he was a young man, but this was no light affair. Instead he felt a compelling possessiveness. Tamarji was his!

Later that night Kurt admitted to himself that convenient morality was not for him—not with Tamarji. Very likely he had ruined the life of a lovely young girl. She, too, must realize the seriousness of their act. No, he could not walk away. He could not bear the thought that she would give herself to anyone else.

He resolved to marry Tamarji in the tribal way. Thus, he must bring a gift to her mother, something she could not refuse. Gold! Gold from Timbuctoo!

By early afternoon they would arrive to warn the tribe. Kurt found new strength as he thought of the slavers. The villagers would safely scatter throughout the jungle and many could avoid impending tragedy. The thought of his beautiful little Tamarji in the hands of slavers burned his brain like a red-hot faggot.

They paused briefly to eat the last of their provisions. The drums of sorrow, seemingly coming from all directions at once, was like torture on the rack, for only when death is upon the land do these drums beat.

Suddenly they came upon a body, a white man, naked, with the skin blistered by the blazing sun. His feet were mangled beyond description, for he had been forced to march for days

without shoes or clothing. His head was nearly severed, and the flies and ants were feasting. The uba, the vulture, was sitting with folded wings on a high limb. As Kurt, Byzas, and Dobi came into sight, the huge bird spread his wings, and his head craned forward to hiss venomously at them.

Dobi scouted around as Byzas examined the body. "Four or five hours ago, no more. He was killed because he couldn't keep up with the others. Knives have cut vines and many horses have gone this way. Though the trail is now wide, we must not follow it to our village." He led the way onto a little-used path and they proceeded cautiously, yet swiftly. Kurt controlled his impatience and anxiety, forcing his mind to think of Tamarji's smile when he came into sight, of her lips that had met his innocently. Yes, he would keep her safe, for she belonged to him. As he ran, he would not allow his mind to think of anything else.

From a slight rise, they cautiously made their way through the heavy foliage. They heard a cock crow, and looked at one another. This could mean that all was well. Kurt rapidly made his way through the dense growth to look down into the valley. Byzas and Dobi came beside him.

Smoke was rising from the few remaining huts. The cock crowed again and clucked to the few hens as they scratched at the ground. A small child wandered aimlessly, whimpering, walking among the bodies.

With thundering heart and churning stomach, Kurt stumbled down the hill. Byzas and Dobi yelled a warning, and then they too rose and followed.

The queen was slumped against her hut, the body riddled with bullets. Her baby granddaughter seemed to sleep at her side. Surrounding the Queen were her guards, their leather shields and spears as toys against the lethal gunpower of the raiders. Almost blindly, Byzas turned to meet the natives trickling back into the village from the jungles, their eyes glassy, their voices soft and plaintive. Suddenly he wanted to silence the sorrow drums. Where in God's name were they coming from? He took two big strides, then stopped short at the sight of young Kurt. The boy was suffering!

"She isn't here, Byzas. Where can she be?" His voice rose. "They have taken her into slavery. Oh, God! I must find her."

"We'll find her, boy, but first we have work to do. Here is a shovel. There is work to be done."

It was late afternoon before the last of the victims were buried in their sacred grounds. Mothers had started fires to feed their hungry children, and salvaged what they could from the ruins of the village. Quarters would be shared until new dwellings could be erected. There were no young men left except Dobi. Old men, old women, and a few small children were the only survivors.

A shout from one of the old men drew everyone's attention. Kurt drew a deep, startled breath as a sad-looking white man with his clothes in rags stumbled into view. His face had the scarlet of deep sunburn, and his hair hung in a dirty mat over his face and shoulders. The lobe of an ear was missing. Kurt's mind whirled with recognition.

"Kurt Bolin! Isn't really you, lad? It's me—Billy! Your old shipmate."

"He's one of the raiders!" yelled the old man.

Billy Buckle desperately protested, "I swear to God I was not one of them murderin' curs. I was a slave!"

"I believe you." It had been over two years since he had seen the friendly sailor who had given him food on the *Determined*. "I want to know what's happened to you. First tell me of a young woman. She is not among the dead. I am afraid that she has been taken as a slave."

"Lad, in the confusion, all I could think about was my chance to escape, and I ran for the jungle."

Kurt turned to Byzas. "I will follow them. Do you go with me?"

"I go with you in the morning. Nothing can be done tonight. Then we will leave to follow your girl."

Kurt could see the sense in this, though it went against his feelings. Restlessly he listened to Billy tell of falling into slavery. "I went to another English ship, the *Victory*. We discharged cargo at Gibraltar and when our craft struck a reef we were forced to abandon ship. The longboats made it to shore, but we were immediately surrounded by more than forty Moors. Our crews had few firearms, and we were easily taken prisoner. We were stripped of clothing and marched into camp.

"Our mate told them that we would be ransomed. This was

the custom for Christian white slaves. However, they had contracted with an expedition headed for the fabled Timbuctoo."

"Well, I was given some clothes and shoes because I had my compass and pocket sextant and knew how to work them. I was obviously of value and could map a route.

"The leader of the expedition was a decent man and he gave orders to be friendly with the natives."

"Who was this leader?" Byzas asked.

"Major-General Stephen Henry. He stopped in this village and the queen invited him to remain for the night. He said he had to push on, but that his men would stay behind and purchase supplies, eat, and rest a bit. When he had gone, all hell broke loose. Captain James murdered the villagers and took slaves. The commander is not aware of what Jacko James is doing."

"Where is your journal now?" Kurt asked soberly.

The sailor went back into the bush and soon returned with a canvas sack. "Here it is. I was mapping the Niger River." He spread the map out for Kurt and Byzas to study. Kurt felt a sense of nostalgia, for he had often studied this kind of thing with his grandpa Roth. For practice, his grandfather had let him map the Thames River.

Now with a critical eye, Kurt studied the map, wondering just which way the men had gone. Byzas briskly said, "We must think of the problems of rescue. Do not waste your time in worry, my friend. Think! Use your brain and plan. We leave at daybreak and then is the time for action!" He gripped the lad's shoulder and then stretched out on his mat. He was immediately asleep.

Kurt talked with Billy Buckle for awhile. The sailor told him of the world outside this jungle vastness. Elijah Peck had sailed for Australia. First Mate Hawksbury had settled in Freetown. Vince Malcolm had become a captive of Jacko James.

"What about Mr. Villier, the ship's doctor?"

"I am not certain of him, but I believe that he too settled in Australia."

When Kurt and Byzas moved out at first morning's light, Billy went with them. Dobi took them as far as the first river, and then turned back. "I must stay to help my people."

Before he left, he gave each of them a small leather pouch of herbs. "You are going into the steaming area where the evils of sickness dwell. Use this as you would salt. Otherwise your bones will be added to the many white men that have died along the trail."

Kurt carried his bow and arrows, and he secreted these precious herbs at the bottom of his quiver. This was the one item that he must keep dry and safe, for it was his sole defense and protection against animals and men.

"Aren't we going to Freetown where I can get another ship?" asked Billy. Kurt's voice was abrupt and decisive. "No, we follow the expedition. I must save those who have been taken captive."

"He means the girl." Byzas' voice was faintly taunting.

"That's madness! Two of you against more than forty armed men?"

Kurt sat on his heels to explain. "We will help you rejoin the expedition and . . ."

The sailor jumped as though stung. "Why do you wish me dead? I am a deserter!"

"Listen to Kurt's plan, my friend," said Byzas.

Kurt explained.

"It won't work! We'll all get killed! I'll take my chances alone in these jungle paths. I'll find my way to Freetown somehow. I'll have a better chance than you," screamed Billy.

Kurt looked over at Byzas.

The Greek pondered a moment, and then smiled and nodded, "It's worth a try."

The little sailor was not through pleading. "You don't know Jacko James. He'll see us all killed, and that's a promise. It's not believable, you two as Arab merchants, robbed and left stranded. And me getting lost and having to run to catch up. It's foolish."

Kurt laughed, "Returning the map will bring you a reward, my friend. Byzas and I both speak Arabic fluently. He has even been on a pilgrimage to Mecca. A word of caution, Billy. Say nothing about our sailing together. If we are to free our friends, warn them against knowing us. There is much danger ahead."

Billy put his hand on Kurt's brown arm and looked up

searchingly into his face. "Are you doing this just to save a native girl? I remember a little brown girl in New Zealand. We promised each other much . . . and now . . ." he paused and thought, "Hmmm, I can't even remember her name."

Kurt looked at him quietly for a moment, then turned on his heel and moved along the path after Byzas.

Late that afternoon Billy caught up with Major-General Stephen Henry's expeditionary forces. No one paid the slightest attention to him. Mules that were loaded with supplies moved slowly along, prodded by their drivers. The creaking harness and the mumbling talk of the soldiers broke the silence of the jungle around them. The sweating smell of the animals mixed with the rotting odor of swamps. Billy saw the big figure of Captain James astride a horse as he cursed and drove along a column of captives. He spied some of his shipmates among the black men and slipped in among the captives. Though he was weary and out of breath, he spoke urgently to the slaves.

Vince Malcolm looked at Billy, surprised, then he said wearily, "I thought you got lost . . . for good. Why'd you come back?"

Rapidly Billy explained Kurt and Byzas' rescue plan.

Captain James shouted, "No talking, just keep moving!" Suddenly he spotted Buckle. "Where have you been? The old man has been asking for you." Jacko pulled Billy up behind him on the horse. The little man barely kept from falling off backwards as they charged to the head of the column.

They stopped beside a sedan chair carried by four stalwart black slaves. The major-general looked up with tired eyes as Billy was virtually tossed off the horse beside him.

"Ah, there you are Mr. Buckles. I feared that some dreadful thing might have happened to you." He ordered the sedan chair down and stepped out. "I do believe that I shall walk with you for a bit. I need the exercise to keep fit. Now Mr. Buckles, you look tired. You must take my seat here and I will walk beside you. Take down my notes as we move along."

Captain Jacko James wheeled his horse, and as he rode off, his face wore a look of supreme contempt for his superior. Billy

recorded his commander's words as the sedan chair rocked gently along.

Kurt and Byzas circled around the caravan which followed a centuries' old trading trail toward the Niger River. It was the following morning, before they made themselves known. They raised their hands in greeting and word passed back along to Captain James.

The officer gave Kurt and Byzas close scrutiny. These men were certainly Arabs for they wore long gowns and turbans. Byzas spoke in fluent Arabic, then apologized in halting English.

"We are your servants, sir. We two are all that are left of our people. It has been several days since our escape from the Moors that attacked us."

The captain looked down at them cynically. These men were obviously more than mere attendants. They looked the equal of anyone in his command, and certainly none could match the strength of the big dark one. Their clothes were expensive, though ill-fitting. Yet, they looked as though they had been tailored for smaller men.

"Why doesn't your friend talk?"

Kurt gave a salutation in Arabic, and then he too spoke in broken English. "We travel to Timbuctoo, master. We would wish to come with you if you would be so kind. Two lone men in this wilderness is not safe. You will be amply rewarded for our safe arrival at any destination to which you are going."

James pinched his lower lip between his finger and thumb, "We shall see. The commandant will want to question you in any case."

Kurt and Byzas stood to one side with their guards as the column went by. No one in the caravan paid the slightest attention to the two Arabs who watched and waited.

Their eyes darted from one face to another, searching for sight of anyone from the village, but found no one they recognized. At last the major-general's guards came into view and Kurt could not suppress a smile as he saw Billy Buckle riding in the sedan chair. But looking at Captain James' angry face, he wondered if they would be given the chance they

needed. He breathed a sigh as the major motioned them to walk beside him.

The captain rode close by, wanting to hear everything that was discussed. These men could be valuable if they had already been to the fabled city. Still, he could not trust them. Their story was improbable, and yet such things sometimes happened. Before this expedition was over, he would be commander and owner of the slaves and goods they carried. Here lay great wealth and nothing must interfere with his plans.

Captain James turned and looked at Billy Buckle, his lips curving with contempt. He cared nothing for map-making or the establishment of friendly relations with the fabled city of Timbuctoo. It was treasure that interested him. He would wait for the right moment to take charge, and leave no one in a position to protest or to report. The two Arabs, he decided, were a danger and must be eliminated. Timing was all important. As soon as their trade goods were exchanged for gold and the caravan was safely out of the city, he would strike!

During the noon rest, the Major and his two Arab guests sat in chairs placed in the shade of a tree. Both Kurt and Byzas were convinced that he was unaware of the raids. This confirmed Billy's account. The major was delighted with Byzas' knowledge of desert travel, and he chuckled with delight when Kurt answered his French quotation with one of his own. Finally he said, "Of course you men will be our guests."

Chapter Fifty-One

Six weeks had passed, and now the caravan was camped just two miles below the high, walled city of Timbuctoo. Negotiations for their entrance had been underway for three days. Kurt and Byzas sat lazily watching as Billy Buckle worked the maps that Kurt had charted. Major-General Henry James was reclining in his pillowed sedan chair, idly watching the turgid flow of the Niger River.

There was a stir among the servants, and they reported that the king's emissary was on the way. James rose to extend greetings to the richly appareled Arab.

Arrangements were at last made for the major and his personal cortege, with slaves for the king, to enter the city—but without soldiers or arms.

Early the next morning they arrived at the gates of Timbuctoo. The gates swung open and the king's messenger, on a magnificent horse, escorted them to the palace.

Kurt was keenly disappointed at the drab scene. Where were the roofs of gold? No, this was not an affluent city, and it was certainly less than civilised. He watched numbers of slaves move up in line, waiting to have their heads chopped off.

Byzas' voice came quietly, "Think nothing of it, Jew. They have plotted against the king—though only by repute, of course."

When they had been housed comfortably in the palace, they were visited by the king's messenger who advised them that the value of their merchandise would be paid in gold, or equally valuable slaves. They were also informed that a large caravan was forming to make the northern trip to Fez in Morocco, and that if they decided to take slaves, they would bring an excellent price.

"The caravan sounds interesting. My friend and I will make immediate arrangements," replied Byzas.

When they were alone, Kurt said severely, "You know well that none of the gold or merchandise belongs to us. It is the major's through the king. Besides, how can we just take off from here? And I'll have nothing to do with taking slaves."

"Be at peace, little one. Of course your king will get his reward, but it's best not to make the waves. The commander understands. Just content yourself with keeping your eyes and ears open."

"I'll try."

Two days later, Kurt and Byzas were summoned to the queen's apartments for an audience.

"But what is expected of us?"

Byzas shrugged. "We will be among many. Have no fear, little man. If she is looking for a *man*, she will not look beyond me." Kurt laughed.

When they arrived at the queen's chambers, they found Billy Buckle seated on a stand with his shirt open to the waist, exposing his white arms and chest. The court ladies were close, staring at his white chest, some even prodding him with timid fingers. Byzas spoke in perfect Arabic, telling the queen that even in far-off Mecca her beauty was known.

The queen turned to her ladies. There was a flutter of excitement and many chattering voices. At last she turned to Byzas and made a request.

Byzas' eyebrows lifted and though Kurt understood fairly well, he thought that he had misunderstood. He turned and watched the grinning Billy as Byzas spoke in English, and explained the queen's request.

"Her Majesty, Mr. Buckle, desires to ascertain by actual inspection, whether the rites of circumcision also extend to Christians, which you claim to be, as well as they do to the followers of Mohammed."

It took Billy a moment to understand. Until now, he had enjoyed the perfumed surroundings and the ladies, and their stares, was not uncomfortable for him. He had been well fed, even though everyone else was enjoying the sacred Fast of Ramaden. This request shattered him, he was reduced to the status of a slave. His eyes glittered with anger, and then his sense of humor bubbled up. He gave his answer to Byzas.

The big Greek choked on an impulse to laugh, but kept his silence until he'd gained control. "The little man says that it is not customary to give such demonstrations before so many beautiful women, but if you will choose the youngest and most lovely of your ladies, he will satisfy her curiosity to her complete satisfaction."

The big eunuch started forward angrily when suddenly the queen's laughter rang out, and everyone joined her. Billy's answer had not offended, and he was allowed to return to quarters with Kurt and Byzas.

Later that day, the three men were required to attend a slave auction, as that was their supposed business.

They made their way through the crowd to the selling block, and Byzas leaned close and whispered, "The females will bring the equivalent of ten pounds, but they sell in Constantinople and Cairo for more than fifty—if we could get them there safely. They are classified in three categories—those with breasts hanging down, plump firm breasts, and little ones. The male slaves will sell for less than one pound."

A young female was the first to be auctioned. Her light cloak was removed and she stood naked. Kurt thought that she looked much like Tamarji, and he rose, murmuring to Byzas, "I will meet you back at quarters."

That evening, they were required to present themselves at the king's banquet. Kurt wished with all his heart that Grandpa Roth could be here with him now. On their trips of discovery in London, they had seen many masterful creations, and here was

the creation of unlimited wealth. Gold reflected upon gold, and the huge banquet rooms were hung with velvet drapes of purple and richly carpeted with hand-woven coverings as soft and deep as the moss-covered earth of the rain forests. The seats and tables were arranged to seat at least a thousand guests. The king's table was made of gold.

A throng was already gathered, laughing and talking as they greeted one another. Everyone waited for the king and queen to make their appearance. Kurt looked to Byzas and at last found their places fairly close to the king's dais.

Kurt and Byzas stood in the throng until the sheikh arrived. He raised his voice to intone "Allah is sufficient. There is no God but He. On him do I rely, for he is the Lord of mighty power." There was a low murmuring of voices speaking the words after him.

The king lowered his arms and the people moved to their seats. Kurt followed, eagerly looking around him at the array of satins and silks, velvets and linens in every color of the rainbow. Silken turbans were in many shades of pink, blue, brown, yellow and rich black as well as startling pure white against the glistening black faces. Golden earrings and loops hung from women's ears and the huge bands of gold that encircled their arms and fingers were set with every precious gem imaginable.

The queen's brother, Ibo, sat next to them to graciously explain the customs of his people.

"That man just entering in the scarlet velvet is the king's eunuch. He castrated himself with his cobber's knife in order to become part of the court. The rewards he has received for his services have made him fabulously wealthy."

Kurt stared. How could anyone betray his manhood in such a way? His attention was caught by a group of jugglers, four men and two girls. The men wore only breech cloths of bright silk, and the women had only sheer pantaloons with revealingly sheer long-sleeved blouses.

Kurt's eyes went to the king lying on a chaise near them. He relaxed as his slave girl fed him.

As the jugglers left, waiters carried in giant silver and gold platters containing succulent chicken and pork.

Acrobats moved across a stage with body flips and cart-wheels as Ibo's voice explained, "These are our favorite." They were followed by a dog act, then a musician with a violin was enthusiastically received by the noisy audience.

At last the table was cleared of everything but fruit and cheese, and during a lull, Billy's voice broke the silence. "What I'd like is some milk. It would help this food stay down better."

Ibo did not understand English, and Byzas translated. At his words, all those nearby turned to stare at the little sailor, then they burst out laughing. They could hear even the king's voice joining in the general amusement. Ibo wiped the tears from his eyes and whispered into Byzas' ears.

The big Greek translated to a red-faced Billy. "Little friend, the only milk available is for the queen and her ladies, and that is but human milk. You will have to ask the queen to share hers with you."

Kurt's laughter died as he looked up to see a man dressed as a holy emir who came to sit before the king. Before him was a low table upon which was set a large crystal ball the size of a man's head. There were three small boxes, a water pitcher, and several earthen cups, as well as a cane—a wand? The man was ancient with age, and weather had taken its toll on his face. Gray bushy eyebrows stood out above his eyes like caterpillars. They seemingly possessed a life of their own as they moved independently of each other and never being still.

He bowed to the king and queen and then turned to face the audience. He was close enough so that Kurt could smell a sweetish odor of opium which explained the unseeing look in his eyes. The emir abruptly raised his wand and a mouse ran out of his sleeve, up to the end of the wand, stopped for a moment, and then exploded into a bluish light with a sound like a hand clap.

There was no applause, and Kurt saw that the people were in awe of this magician. With a flourish, he showed them the empty boxes, then with a "whish", his arms moved across them and birds flew out across the room. Next, he threw his wand upon the floor, and it crawled rapidly like a snake and struck a man in his leg. The man stared at it, mesmerized, and then slowly crumpled into a heap. The magician reached down and

took the snake by the tail, and it instantly became a wand again. He touched the man's forehead with the stick and the fellow groaned and rose groggily to his feet.

The old emir returned to his little table, placing his hands on the crystal ball. Silence fell over the crowd as they waited breathlessly. "Master, you have enemies within these walls." The magician pointed his stick directly at Kurt.

The king waited expectantly for the emir's next words. "That man is not what he claims to be. He is clothed as an Arab and a Moslem. He is neither Arab nor Moslem. He is Jew." The king got angrily to his feet, and at his signal, both Byzas and Kurt were surrounded by guards. Kurt was stripped of his turban and caftan, his red hair hung down over his white shoulders. His chest heaved from his efforts at resistance. Soldiers grabbed his hair from behind and jerked his head back. A knife was placed at his throat as the guard looked up at the king, awaiting his signal.

Byzas' muscles tensed as he too waited. Then he noticed that the queen's hand had come gently down onto the king's shoulder to stay the order for execution.

"Guard him well," came the gruff order.

Byzas relaxed then moved up to bow before the king. "May I speak, oh master?" At the royal nod, he continued calmly. "This Jew is my friend. We came to your city for many reasons—but also because I am Moslem, and I have been away from my people for too many years."

The old emir's voice cut stridently into the silence, "Master, we cannot know that he is one of us!"

Byzas shrugged, "I have been to Mecca. I have made the seven circuits and kissed the black stone embedded in the Kaaba Mosque."

A murmuring like a breeze ran through the crowd. "Many men have told of the pilgrimage. You speak of those things, but that is not proof," replied the old magician.

"On that pilgrimage there were many who died. One man gave of his food and clothing until his own strength was gone. I helped him the last few miles to the mother mosque."

The King's own brother, a sheikh, rose and moved swiftly to peer into Byzas' face. In a voice of wonder he said, "It is true.

This one carried me on his back for several miles so that I could die at the mother mosque. Yes, master, he is a true Believer."

The King's mouth lifted in a faint smile and then sternly he said, "But your friend came into our midst like a thief in the night. That is the way of a coward, and we cannot allow a disbeliever and a coward to live. You know well, then, that we can only forgive a worthy enemy."

Kurt looked at the nightmarish scene unbelievably. He saw the pushing, shouting angry crowd, and the magician who was violently resisting Byzas' plea for the life of his friend. He knew that Major Henry was standing beside the Greek and pleading for the life of the young red-haired Jew. The magician's voice was again heard and it brought silence, "Oh master, though you may mistake and allow an unbeliever among us, you cannot condone a deceiver who is also a coward."

Byzas' voice rang out loudly, "My friend is not a coward. He will meet any challenge!"

"So be it," said the king. "Make ready the trial by blood."

Satisfied, the magician turned and placed his crystal ball at the feet of the King, then he turned to trace with chalk a ten-foot-circle in the center of the floor.

Byzas heard Ibo's voice, "Your friend has accepted a most painful and humiliating death, for no one wins the contest he has agreed to. After his defeat, he will be bound and thrown bleeding to the pigs—and I understand this is most distasteful to a Jew." He shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of hopelessness.

Kurt said grimly, "Tell us of this fight."

"Your opponents will be three men, one inside the circle and two outside. The insider will fight with no restrictions. If he can force any part of your body to the floor outside the circle, then the other two men can maim that part. If you defeat the insider then one of the other two men will step into the circle to continue. You will battle three of our best fighters, brothers, Tuaregs, and they have never been defeated. This is a game played by children, but men play it for money—and tonight you play it for your life—or perhaps, who knows, freedom. The music has started, and so it begins."

As they turned to the ring, Kurt saw that the king was seated

with the magician on one side and the sheikh on the other. Below them on a bench sat the white-faced major and Billy Buckle. Before them sat an old pipe player, cross-legged and blind. He heard the soft words of Byzas as he leaped to his feet, "Boy, finish these clowns. I'm tired and it's past my bedtime."

Kurt stepped into the ring and swung swiftly to meet his opponent. The man was nearly seven feet tall, with beautifully developed muscles. His movements had the grace of a cat, smooth and sure. He was vain, however, for he wore gold bracelets and a belt. His body was slick with palm oil and would be almost impossible to hold.

Kurt began to jump up and down, loosening his muscles. At last he leaped toward the bigger man who jumped out of reach, his teeth flashing in his black face. The two brothers twined cartwheels around the outside of the circle, taunting, trying to draw Kurt's attention.

Suddenly a pair of rock-hard feet came through the air at Kurt like cannonballs. He jumped easily aside, but not quickly enough to completely escape their thrust. He was caught on the shoulder to spin helplessly toward the men on the outside. A great cheer rose from the crowd and Kurt saw the feet coming at him again.

This time, however, Kurt was ready, and as he jumped aside he reached and grasped a gold bracelet and squeezed with all his strength until he felt the bones crumble. His opponent rained blows all the while, but he had felt worse in his daily practises with Byzas. Swiftly, Kurt twisted, then grasped the man by his belt, threw him over his hip, then tossed him into the chest of his brother on the outside, knocking him to the floor.

One of the brothers was defeated and his penalty was death. There was silence as Kurt heaved in great gulps of air.

The magician shuffled forward past the writhing man to powder his brother's feet and hands. The second Tuareg moved inside the circle and tried to stab at Kurt's eyes with his clawlike nails. Kurt suddenly grasped him in a tight bear hug and applied pressure. The man began to weaken. The cheering from the spectators stopped as blood seeped from the man's nose and his body went limp. Kurt dropped him to the floor, then he stalked to the edge of the ring and stood with his feet

wide apart, breathing heavily. He pointed to his two fallen opponents.

"Surely two victories are enough. Must I kill yet another? All I want is my freedom." Kurt stepped back and picked up the unconscious Tuareg and lifted him high over his head by the man's golden belt. "What is your answer, oh master? Death—or life—for this man?"

The king rose to his feet. "You have won honorably. You have won your freedom." He turned and silently left the room.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Ibn Ben Juba sat tall on his camel. He led the caravan and this was unusual for a young man. Kurt had first met him in the city of Timbuctoo when preparations were underway for the two-thousand-mile trek to Tripoli.

Kurt rode on his camel behind Ibn and after three weeks on the desert, he was becoming accustomed to the motions of the beast. Byzas on his own animal was behind Kurt, and he grinned at the big Greek before he turned in his saddle and looked at the long line of the caravan as it snaked along the desert for more than two miles.

As he settled back, his thoughts went to the major-general. He was glad that the king had finally given him recognition as leader of the expedition and the representative of the English king. It was a start to friendly relations between the two countries. The king of Timbuctoo had paid Major Henry in ivory and gold for the merchandise brought to their city. He had then furnished the Englishman with guides, slaves, and camels. The Major, with Billy Buckle at his side, was now continuing his task of mapping the Niger River.

Kurt threw the end of his turban around his shoulders. These

blasted sand flies penetrated everything. His thoughts returned to the major and Billy. He had promised to meet them another day, somewhere in England. His mouth twisted as he wondered briefly if he would ever see those green fields again—and his mother—and his grandfather. He shrugged his shoulders in the deadening heat. The rumors were that Captain James had unsuccessfully attacked a caravan. There had been no sign of the captain or his troops, and the major had reluctantly been forced to leave without them.

After more hours of rocking lethargy, Kurt stirred and tried to stretch his stiffening muscles. He wondered how Byzas was faring and glanced back at the big man. One of the Greek's legs was swathed in bandages for he had become infected with the guinea worm. Kurt knew it could prove fatal. It was about one-eighth of an inch in diameter and many yards long. The worm had erupted just below the knee, and each day a few inches of the animal was rolled on a stick, taking care not to break the thread. A new stick was started before the old one was cut loose. This morning Ben Juba had said that the worm was nearly all out of the leg. A few more days, perhaps.

"All right, my friend?" Kurt yelled back.

"All right," the big man answered, and then knowing of Kurt's concern, he motioned toward his swathed leg, "It is nothing."

At noon they stopped, the camels were hobbled, and small fires heated tea which they drank as they ate dates that were cured in sand. "How is it, Byzas?" Kurt asked again as the big man carefully unwrapped his bandages. Kurt moved to help him and a slave brought ointment to soften the wound and keep it open. When it became close to the skin he stopped for fear of breaking it off, applied more ointment, and then bound the leg again to hold the stick in place.

Ibn caught Kurt's eye and shook his head slightly. Kurt rose and looked down at his friend who was built like Hercules, with abounding energy, and indifference to suffering and pain. But with this affliction, the desert ahead, and limited food and water, how long would the big man's strength last with such a drain on his system.

At last the camels were released from their hobbles, for the short rest was over. "Tonight we camp at Guade Ahnat, and a

third of our journey will be complete," Ben Juba said and gave a satisfied nod. His face was dark from the winds and sun, though his white hood gave some protection. He had been born in the desert and his eyes were like black stones, alive with dancing lights.

As they moved into formation again the wind came up to blow grit into the air. Kurt covered his face with his hood, though the heat was stifling. He was compelled to open his burnoose to let the wind dry the sweat from his face and neck. His burning eyes were mere slits to keep the abrasive sand from them. Ibn pointed into the sky, and Kurt looked upward to see an eagle with lustrous red plumage catching the rays of the sun. "The monkeys have grown careless and are sleeping in the treetops. Watch. The eagle is preparing to attack. Such birds are strong enough to kill a large monkey, and even small antelopes and newborn gazelles, but their wings are not always powerful enough to carry the kill away."

"What happens?"

"Oh, they simply tear it apart and eat what they want. What is left is immediately taken by other animals. The dead are not allowed to pollute the land for long." Ben led the way into the welcome shade of a giant oak. Camps had been made here for hundreds of years, and ashes were deep from the many fires. There were cleared areas of grass for livestock, and Ibn was anxious to stake out their camels. The trail was hard on both animals and humans.

Everyone washed in the clear stream, then relaxed and listened to the familiar sounds of the camp.

The caravan leaders and slave owners assembled each night to discuss problems and plans. Many were much older, but Kurt noticed that they held Ibn Ben Juba in high regard. Tonight the discussion went on for several hours.

When Kurt awoke the next day, the eastern sky was lit by hidden sun, but as the first camels rode out, they were silhouetted with the white rim of the blazing sun as it rose above the horizon. Kurt turned his eyes away from the blaze of the light and gave his attention to the comfort of his friend.

Byzas appeared indifferent, but Kurt could see the lines of strain and the gray tinge of illness under his skin. He moved his

ailing leg with some difficulty, and needed help to sit in a more comfortable position. They watched the long caravan move slowly on by. The first animals were the heavily boned baggage camels with light cages fastened to their backs. Each held three girls. These were the virgins under heavy guard. They were a good trade commodity, and they would fetch fifty pounds each on the auction block in Tripoli. He watched the seventy female slaves as they stumbled past. Kurt felt a stirring of pity. Some were in a bad way, he realized that they would not live to make the next fourteen hundred miles on foot. Next came the male slaves, and Kurt counted forty boys, all wearing light chains on their wrists.

Byzas' soft voice told him, "The boys have been chosen for harem duty. They will be castrated at Salah, twenty-five days away. Some of them will die before we get there, and others will die after the operation. No more than two or three of the boys will complete this trip."

"How much will they be worth in Tripoli?" Kurt asked.

"Maybe as much as ten virgins."

Suddenly Kurt felt fury at what he was hearing. These boys were about the same age he had been when he boarded the prison ship. He had shed bitter tears of frustration at life's brutality. He had felt despondency at Tamarji's abduction. As he watched these young boys—thirteen, fourteen—fifteen years old—trudge hopelessly by, he was filled with rage. It was not right for one man to enslave another. Unconsciously he looked heavenward. He felt embarrassed that he had complained about his own lot in life. At that moment he knew he would somehow clear himself, and go forward to make something of his life! But he knew he would probably never see Tamarji again.

Kurt looked outward to the vast reaches of the desert. He had felt chains and the lash of the whip. He wriggled in his loose fitting djellaba, and he could feel the old scars as they rubbed against the soft fabric. But here he was, sitting with friends. He was free, and was strong. His health and his life had not been taken from him, and he had the whole wide world before him. Helplessly he watched the boys, wishing there was a way to help but knowing that if they were freed now, they

would have to stay with the caravan to maintain life itself. He glanced at Byzas. The big man had much experience, even of slavery.

The rough voice came softly, "Forget it. There is nothing you can do. This has been going on for centuries and will continue until men raise their voice to change the laws of civilization in every nation on the face of the earth. I sometimes think there is not enough brains, strength, and money to achieve freedom for all mankind. Since the beginning of man, they have taken each other. The whites take the black, the blacks take the yellow, the yellows take the white—and every color seems to take each other. No, it is the way of man."

Kurt looked at him with wonder, for it was a long speech for the big man, and he had not realized that his friend had such thoughts. He sat back beside Byzas and they watched the long line of slaves go by.

"It is time for us to go," Byzas' quiet voice interrupted Kurt's thoughts. They mounted the camels, and still could see many camels and drivers yet behind them in the two miles of caravan.

As they left the forest's edge, they felt the full blast of the Sahara sun and sand. Now there would be twenty-five days of heat without relief, before they reached Salah.

"There are usually more than ten wells ahead, although some of them could be dry. We never can be sure," Ibn said quietly.

Kurt looked out at the rolling sandhills rippled by the wind and constantly changing shape. The first leg of their journey had been due west, but now it swung to the northwest. They moved slowly along, and it seemed they were moving back and forth in one place, for the scene seemed so unchanged. He remembered how he recited the Torah aloud in the hold of the *Determined*. Now he tried parts in Hebrew, and Greek, followed by English, and then French. With a dry chuckle through cracked lips, he tried some Islamic. He suddenly realized that he was getting rusty in the languages that his grandfather had made such a point of teaching him. *You must become a banker, for you have the mind for it, my son*, grandpa had said. He'd had such hopes and plans for him.

All the days were alike; hot, dry, dusty, and with flies all the

way. Water was getting more scarce and vultures steadily followed the caravan. Kurt had seen them for days now as they wheeled around them high in the sky. Ibn had said they'd be in Salah tonight, and this was the noonday stop. He looked back at the slaves. Every one of them had dropped where he stood, the minute rest was called. They were handed dates and figs dried in hot sand, but there was no water.

Kurt helped Byzas from his camel and saw that the big man had lost considerable weight. Ibn came to help him and they laid him down under a canvas shield that had been set up. Kurt took the little water left in his goatskin and poured some in the sick man's mouth. Byzas' face had a sheen of sweat and dazedly he opened his eyes.

"Save your water, little Jew. I have enough for my needs." He attempted a weary smile and then his eyes closed.

Kurt turned with questioning eyes to Ibn. The man shrugged his shoulders then shook his head in doubt.

That night the caravan reached Salah. By midnight Kurt saw the last of the men and beasts come to the wells to quench their thirst. Through the soft bonds of sleep, Kurt heard the cheerful voice of Ibn. It wasn't yet daylight. Kurt sat up as the other man said, "We have lost only seventy-seven slaves, the older ones. The girls and young men are holding up well. Today we cut the boys, and let them rest for a day. That will keep our losses down. After a good night's rest, we will be on our way again."

Byzas was insistent that Kurt help him to his feet, and that they walk to a place where they could talk privately. "We will speak in Greek. Perhaps it will be the last time. Yes, I know that I am weak, but I have enough strength for this. We must go alone. I will tell them I want to show you ancient roman ruins. We will take the trail tomorrow. Besides, you will not wish to be here when the boys are being gelded."

Kurt was concerned. The big man should not exert himself like this.

"Don't worry. I can still handle you. Just come with me," ordered Byzas.

"Where?"

"We are going to Ksar Mara," Byzas said firmly.

"There is nothing there but old ruins." Ibn said when told of

their plan. "I was there once. It is well to stay away from that place. The spirits of many dead are yet there."

"We will meet you on the trail tomorrow," Byzas told him. "The ruins are only a few miles from your route."

It was mid-morning when Byzas pointed out the stone fingers of the ruins pointing up into the sky. "Ksar Mara," he said.

Kurt thought they looked like London chimneys from this distance, but as they drew nearer, he was surprised at the size of this ancient fortress. It was difficult to imagine a thriving city here, built where there was nothing but rubble and rock-strewn desolation. They followed the ancient trail around piles of rocks, and then they came out on a plain that was marked with sparse vegetation. But there was more, for it was spotted with the bones of people and animals. The camels picked their way around the skeletons that were bleached and decaying—slowly becoming a part of the earth itself.

Byzas knew where he was going. They passed foundations made of huge chiseled stones. Steps had been fashioned of the same material. Byzas turned into a courtyard where there was little wind and some shade.

The camels dropped to their knees on command, and Kurt jumped to the paving stones, turning to help Byzas dismount before he hobbled the beasts to browse on the few turfts of grass.

The Greek leaned against the ancient wall. "Look around Kurt," he said. "I will catch my breath, and then we will go on."

He closed his eyes and Kurt went to explore the hallways. He was excited when he found the faint outlines of pictures. They were like the ones he had seen in books as a boy. He dusted them off so that he could see them more vividly. There was a scene of enormous herds of cattle, hunters armed with bows and faded pictures of women, children and huts. He wondered about the artist. He had lived thousands of years ago. Kurt looked up at the sun. More than an hour had passed and he hurried down the long, windy halls, stepping around huge squares of rock which had once fallen from the roof. Wind whipped little gusts of fine sand to sting his eyes.

He was covering his face as he rounded the corner back to

Byzas. He squinted through half-closed eyes to see that Byzas had been taking the wrapping off his leg.

"It is nothing, boy." The strongman held up a stick. "See, the worm is not torn in two." Between his big fingers he held up the pointed tail of the animal. It had come out clean.

Kurt had never seen such a smile on Byzas' face. He dropped to his knees and threw his arms around his friend.

Byzas pushed at him. "Come, little one, help me up. We have work to do." It seemed that with new hope and the worm out of his system, he'd found new strength. Kurt followed him down the ancient hallways then into a passage, down several worn stairs, and into a small room. The roof was gone and rubble littered the floor. The beautiful bases of columns had been broken and destroyed, and dust swirled about them in the blowing wind.

"Clear the floor, Kurt. There are slabs of stone that we must raise."

Kurt was soaked with sweat by the time that he had removed the stones from the center of the room. At last four slabs were revealed. Byzas had brought along the iron bar and he told Kurt, "Take this and wedge it between the slabs. We must raise them."

After a few attempts, Kurt managed to open what was obviously a grave. There was a skeleton of a woman on her side with her knees doubled up. Kurt looked up, feeling a sense of desecration.

"It has been opened before," Byzas answered his look. "This is a queen, sacred to the desert people."

Kurt saw she had seven gold bracelets on her right wrist, and seven silver on her left. A gold chain hung around her neck with an amulet attached to it.

"She lies on a thin sheet of marble," said Byzas. "You can feel the edges with your fingers. Raise it carefully so as not to disturb her. You will find it is light."

Kurt was able to straddle the marble slab and raised the little queen. He set the skeleton down beside Byzas on the floor then looked at what he had uncovered. There was four chests containing Roman gold coins mixed with pearls and diamonds. Kurt was stunned, for never had he expected to see such treasure as this.

"Put the queen back." said Byzas, and there was urgency in his voice. "We will have company soon."

Kurt carefully replaced the marble slabs. He rolled rubble and stones back over the small grave as Byzas took handfuls of loose sand to cover their footprints. They left the room and started back toward the camels when the Greek halted. Kurt could see that he was now very weak, and he put his arms under his shoulders to support him.

In his low, husky voice, Byzas said in an urgent whisper, "Kurt, you must go to Tripoli and then to England to receive a pardon. Prepare to inform your government of what is happening in this dark continent. I go to a widowed friend in Cairo. She has a thousand slaves and will give to me the help that I need. I will come back for this treasure, and bring you your share wherever you are. You will have half, little Jew. Promise me, that you will use this wealth for good purposes."

Kurt gripped his friend's arms and looked steadily into his eyes. "That is my promise."

Chapter Fifty-Three

JUNE, 1828

"He's the one I was telling you about," said Captain Harrington as he pointed Kurt out to the major. "We picked him up at Freetown. I was told that he'd been reported dead several years ago when a work party of convicts was attacked by natives."

"Do you mean to say that he survived several years in the African jungles? Incredible— Why did he return?"

The captain shrugged his shoulders in answer. "A trick of fate. He made it across the Sahara to Tripoli with a caravan. When he arrived in the city, a Mr. Hawksbury, former first mate of the prison ship *Determined*, saw him and immediately demanded his arrest as an escaped convict. He was subsequently turned over to me for transportation to the prison colonies here in Australia.

The two men continued to observe Kurt. "No papers, captain?"

"No. They were apparently lost when the *Determined* went down." They both turned to watch as a contingent of prisoners was escorted from the ship. This was a group of 137 women convicts. They would be taken to the jail yard. Settlers needing

wives would look them over and have first pick. The remainder would be transported by coach to the women's workhouses near Sydney.

The last of the males were now lined up. Red arrows were stenciled on their clothing. Some would be assigned to work for farmers. Others, more hardened, would be used for public works, like the building of roads and parks. Those considered unfit to mingle in society were slowly filling the jails, and awaited transportation on the *Elgin* to Tasmania. There, they met with the severest treatment possible—total banishment from which there was no escape.

As the men stood in line ready to go ashore, their clothes wet from the cold winter's rain, the major considered what to do with Kurt. The young man stood up to his full height of six and a half feet. He had a splendid physique with wide shoulders, a tapered waist, flat belly, trim hips and sturdy long legs. Kurt felt the major's gaze and his face remained hard and flinty, with no smile. He stood aloof and arrogant. There was a scar from an eye down one cheek that gave an even harder and more dangerous look to him. This, along with the black metal glint of the double-studded convict collar that was partially hidden by his long matted reddish hair and beard gave him a look of considerable toughness. His unsmiling lips gave his face a look of contemptuous endurance.

A mate barked an order, and the men strained against the wooden handles that raised the cargo from the hold. A rip in Kurt's shirt revealed a back of scarred flesh. The impulse that the major felt to question Kurt passed, for this convict was obviously a hard one.

Cynically Kurt watched the interest in the major's face die, and once again he felt his faint hope of a reasonable chance in this new country disappear.

The officer spoke firmly, "That man doesn't need papers, captain, his record is written on his face and back. We can't keep him here. He goes to Tasmania."

The captain was pleased, for Kurt was the best worker he'd ever had. He played with the thought of keeping Kurt on permanently, then reluctantly he tossed the thought aside. He would be paid by the government for Kurt's delivery and he could always get men to man the ship.

As Kurt bent to hoist up the cargo he caught glimpses of the city. It was mostly hidden in the mists of the light rain, but the air was pungent with the forests of gum trees that grew on the surrounding hills. He watched smoke as it lazily rose above the buildings from coal-burning fires. Carriages were drawn by spirited horses down the cobblestoned lanes, and the iron rims of the wheels and the sharp sound of hoofs reminded him of London streets. The traffic was similar—carts and wagons, and people crowding the landing dock as they waited for cargo and mail that would be at least nine months old. He had a sudden flash of something like homesickness, and then it passed with the wry thought that nine years from boyhood to manhood in virtual slavery had dimmed the memory.

Somewhere during those long years this land had become a beacon to him. He thought fondly of Byzas and his friendship. Yes, he had thought of this raw new land with eagerness, wanting to become a part of it. He thought of the ship's doctor, Emile Villier. It was he who had told him of this country with its strange, subtle beauty.

He watched as other convicts were led ashore. Why wasn't he taken with them? A wave of doubt assailed him, and his big scarred fists clamped onto the oak handles until the scars on his knuckles turned white. Suddenly an often recurring hatred welled through his body. Enough, he thought violently. Enough! And all to pay for nothing. Anger began to encircle him like a hot steel band.

Kurt's eyes returned to the city. The fog was lifting as the sun burned through. There were timbered hills as far as he could see. It looked like Lord Jeffrey's estate in England. He looked down the street as the shops began to open, and breathed deeply of the pleasantly faint smell of camphor and clean air. He suddenly felt a desperate need to acquire land, to build, to have his own!

Kurt's thoughts were interrupted as there was a shout from the dock. A carriage drew up and a guard hopped down to open the door. He was followed closely by a well-dressed clergyman with chains on his wrist.

As the guard brought the reverend aboard, the convicts became silent. One of the prisoners strained against his chains to see and cried out, "It's him, mates. It's the bloke what done

in his wife. Poisoned 'er, 'ee did. Ee should ha' got the 'drop'. We do' want the stinkin' bastard wi' us." He hawked and spit in the direction of the clergyman, and the other convicts echoed his words in a chorus.

A sergeant roared above the noise, and his whip coiled out along the deck with a sharp cracking sound like a shot. "Move along, ye dirty nips. I'll not put up with your lip." A long line of new prisoners was forced aboard.

Guards flanked the row of convicts, prodding them along with the butts of their muskets. Even after they had all disappeared into the bowels of the ship, the very air seemed foul with the echoing sounds of their cursing and the smell they left behind.

Kurt turned his eyes to study the little minister. He was past forty and looked intelligent. Brown hair hung to his shoulders, and his face was clean-shaven. His nose was thin and well defined, and he had the piercing blue eyes of a zealot. He was now looking back toward the street, and Kurt followed his gaze to an older man and woman, perhaps his parents. The old man helped his wife back into the waiting carriage and they rode off.

The sight brought Kurt's thoughts back to his own mother and grandfather. He had tried to keep the pain of remembrance from his thoughts. His loved ones dwelled in another world better not recalled. His few letters had never been answered, but there was small chance that they had ever been received.

Kurt was taken to a covered area where benches and tables were put to feed the men, and he watched as the little minister was led to the captain's quarters. He felt a measure of relief that the man hadn't been put in with the other convicts—at least not yet.

He looked for a seat among the ship's crew and they shifted to give him room. He had worked hard and well among them since Freetown nine months ago. By now they were treating him as one of their own. Kurt was an excellent worker and had become knowledgable enough to take responsibility. They would like to have him continue the voyage as one of the crew, but they knew that the captain could lose his ticket and his future if he took a convict for his own use.

One of the sailors looked up at the young man, "I know that

you had hopes of getting ashore here mate, but you'll soon be at MacQuarrie Harbor, Tasmania. While escape is next to impossible, ye'll make out."

The men nearby all broke in with words of encouragement. Kurt's lips parted in a rare smile, and he nodded briefly. "And another thing, lad," a grizzled veteran growled, "Before we arrive, I'll have that metal collar from your neck."

Kurt ran his finger between his neck and the iron band, sighing with pleasure at the thought of having it removed. It had been loose when it had been riveted on, but with his maturing growth and muscle development, it had become close. Besides his whiskers became entangled in it, and the vermin were becoming uncontrollable.

A cabin boy came running wide-eyed to the table with a message for Kurt, "The captain would like ye in his quarters."

The sergeant came, red-faced and angry. "What is goin' on here?"

Kurt pointed to the cabin boy, "I was summoned to the captain's quarters."

"I will escort this convict to the captain," said the soldier. He motioned Kurt to move ahead.

At the captain's door, he nudged Kurt forward, "You wish to see this man, sir?" He looked annoyed when he saw the minister sitting beside the captain.

"You may leave, Sergeant." At the captain's firm command, the sergeant touched his finger to his cap and stepped angrily out into the corridor. Brusquely he motioned a guard to station himself beside the captain's cabin, cautioning him to be ready if the prisoners made an attempt to escape.

Captain Harrington motioned Kurt to sit. "Bolin, I want you to meet the Reverend Charles Stuart." The commander spoke soberly. "It is my unfortunate duty to take Reverend Stuart to MacQuarrie Harbor. We were at school together, and I am confident that he is innocent of the crime of which he has been convicted. I am afraid that the prisoners will give him an extraordinarily difficult time. For that reason I have called you here. You alone can help him. I will put you together aboard ship. At the settlement, I will be of no help to you, Charles, but Kurt here knows the ropes. Tell us your story now."

"I am grateful for your friendship." The little man shifted

uneasily in his chair, then he turned to Kurt, "Please don't feel responsible for me, I do not ask for special consideration."

"Your story please, Charles," Harrington repeated. "Bolin is your only hope of reaching Tasmania alive."

"My wife and I had been in Newcastle for a little less than a year. Before that we had five years in Freetown," recounted the cleric.

"I have just come from Freetown. I was in the jungles for six years." Kurt looked intently at the minister.

"Yes, the captain has advised me of that. While we were there, my wife contracted an illness common in that area. I requested a transfer from my superiors in the Anglican Church. Communications to England are slow, and she got worse and worse. The transfer finally came, and we booked passage. We had an extremely hard voyage, but after we arrived here, she seemed at first to recover. It was only a temporary improvement, however. I had some medicine that I'd brought with me from Freetown, but my Australian physician changed the medication and stressed that under no circumstances should I give her anything else. If the two potions were mixed it could be lethal. He advised me to get rid of the medicine that I'd brought from Africa." He paused, and Kurt saw that his hands were gripped so tightly that they were white.

"A fortnight ago, she suddenly screamed out in the night and went into convulsions and hallucinations. I ran for the medicine chest and brought the laudanum to her. She fought me, screaming that it was the wrong medicine, that I was trying to poison her. I held her in my arms, trying to get control, knowing that her prescription was the only thing that would bring relief. She begged me not to give her the wrong medicine. "No, no," she yelled again and again, and then convulsed, threw her head back and died in my arms. My housekeeper and her husband saw me with one hand on her neck and the other at the top of her back trying to calm her. The servant clutched my shoulder, saying, 'Oh Mr. Stuart, you've done her in.'

"My wife was well-loved and my small success with my flocks has been largely due to the sweet influence she added to my 'calling'. I feel that without her I have no friends. Certainly they have turned against me." At last the minister looked up with moist, bloodshot eyes and there were beads of sweat on

his forehead. "I didn't kill her, gentlemen. You see, I loved her—and I don't know how I shall bear to live without her." Kurt saw his look of hopelessness and despair. Kurt looked intently at Reverend Stuart. It was obvious that he was a man of culture. He would be a welcome companion. They could share ideas—even in the penal colony. Eagerly his mind reached for the friendship of this gentle man. His grandfather had stimulated his thinking ability, but in the last few years, sheer survival had all but drowned his intellect. He looked up and smiled at the two older men.

Mr. Stuart noted the softening of the stern features of the man Kurt Bolin. Physically the man was everything that he was not. He was of massive size and strength, and seemed to fill the room. But physical strength was of little use to a man of the cloth. The purpose of his life was to save souls, and the mind must direct the body to bend to the will of God. Perhaps the Lord had a special work for him, even here. Both the captain and Kurt watched the minister. A few minutes earlier, the man had sat forlorn and dejected, now he lifted his sagging shoulders and his chin went up. He looked at them with a radiant face for he was remembering the counsel he had received at his ordination. "The Lord works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform". He turned a kindly smile toward Kurt. Perhaps he could help this wayward lad back to the path of righteousness. Yes, he welcomed the opportunity for his work at MacQuarrie Harbor.

Down the corridor Kurt and the reverend found a change of clothing waiting in a small cabin. The captain said he would share his meals with them. Kurt could scarcely believe what was happening. Certainly the commander would enjoy the company of a clergyman, especially an old friend, but to include himself. Kurt knew full well that he must have the convict stench, and his manners were rusty from long disuse. Even the easy flow of good conversation had been lost in the vulgar speech patterns of those around him.

The captain had made several trips with convicts. He was paid for safe delivery of men and cargo, and it had always been one and the same to him before. He felt a loyalty to England, and also needed the money. Now his retirement was in sight.

One more round trip, and he would retire with his wife to their little home in Cornwall. He had never allowed himself to become involved with the prisoners before. His crew had used the women, had abused the men with short rations and hard tasks, and the whip and chains had turned them into beasts. Sickness and disease had kept a school of sharks following in his ship's wake. It had been a raw and brutalizing experience, but now, with his gentle religious friend here, Harrington felt a revulsion at his blindness.

He thought now of Kurt Bolin. He had watched him over the last months and had come to respect his superior strength. If the young man must fight, it had been defensive, not aggressive. Men respected him, and he showed superior intelligence.

Perhaps, the captain mused, by the end of this journey, he would in some small way have atoned for his past indifference.

He moved to gaze through the porthole out to the open sea. With his hands clasped behind his back, he hoped that he would not live to regret his course of action. Certainly his officers did not understand, but that did not concern him. He sighed, and then his thoughts lifted as he considered the hours following dinner when he could speak to others as educated peers.

Two days later, the *Elgin* was riding the tides of the open seas. Kurt was high in the rigging working at the ropes, when he remembered their departure, how he had looked down and seen small figures waving farewells to those on board. He had noticed again the elderly man and woman, standing with their faces upturned, searching for a last look at their son. He had looked beyond people to the limitless stretches of open land in the distance. *Someday, he'd thought, I'll build me a place and future in this land.* Now he looked down at the captain as he paced the deck below.

The first mate walked beside him hoping the commander would be pleased with what he saw. There were twenty-two convicts busy scrubbing the decks under whip and gun. Kurt thought with a bitter smile that it was probably the only work that they could do.

Kurt heard the captain speak, "I've seen the natives of Monomataps. They are a nasty people, but still of great quality

compared to most of these convicts." His nose twitched, for the stench of the prisoners' bodies and clothes matched the sewage that spewed from their mouths. How could gentle Charles manage? Kurt could survive but, a few days of this would destroy the little minister. He went to find him, deeply worried for his friend.

He saw the reverend spreading varnish on a handrail. Nearby were several convicts on their hands and knees scrubbing the decks. Mr. Stuart was looking down upon their bent heads with a sweet smile, as though they were in prayer. The men occasionally looked up at the little man, with amazement. They seemed to like him. The captain was brought to a standstill, then he shook his head, and a reluctant smile began to spread across his face. His friend had inner strength and would be all right—and he had Kurt. He turned and continued with his inspection.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Kurt rubbed the fog of his breath from the glass covering the porthole. Looking out over the long unbroken line of the Pacific rollers, he searched the land that rose above the horizon. This was MacQuarrie Harbor. The land was only a shade darker than the sky and ocean. Curtains of rain almost covered the open sea, and the wind was catching up puffs of white foam from the crests of the waves. It was a gray, bleak, sombre day.

Sharing quarters with the Reverend Charles Stuart was not an unmixed blessing, for he could not stand upright in the low-ceilinged room. The bunk was too short, and the space was confining. He turned back as Mr. Stuart folded a letter he had just completed: his resignation from the Anglican Church. Even though he maintained his innocence, he did not want to embarrass the Church.

The cleric addressed an envelope and set aside pen and the inkwell, carefully closing the lid. He held the letter between his thin white hands, staring at it as he thought back over his career.

Kurt felt penned in, and caught up an oilskin from the peg by the door, draping it across his broad shoulders. It was much too small for him to wear. He turned and placed his big dark hand on the little minister's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze, then moved out into the dark and narrow corridor. He opened the door onto the deck, and his practised eye took in the scene. The wind was on the beam, and the crewmen were in the rigging taking up the sail. The captain stood with spread legs upon the poop deck barking orders to the mate while he kept an eye on the helmsman.

An army guard followed Kurt as he climbed the steep steps to the captain, who smiled at him and said, "MacQuarrie Harbor, lad. It will be impossible to clear those rocks in this weather, but longboats will be sent from camp to pick you up." He sighed, "You've a long swim before you can set foot on the land."

A great clap of thunder burst over their heads, and Kurt felt the deck shudder beneath his feet. His searching eyes caught sight of a seaman high up in the foresail as he looked heavenward and crossed himself. Another distant clap of thunder boomed over them and its echo rumbled out over the distant land.

When the sound died away, the captain continued speaking, "The settlement is surrounded by thick scrub and hostile aboriginals. I have not been on land here myself, but I have talked with officers who served here. They say that escape is impossible. Those who tried the water are dead. A small boat cannot survive the rough seas, especially without sails or compass. Sailors claim you can walk across from New Zealand to Australia on the back of sharks, they are so thick." He stopped to shout an order to his mate, and then he continued quietly for Kurt's ears alone. "The undergrowth is made up of mats of vegetation from fallen trees. They lay horizontally, forming a sort of platform as high as thirty feet above the ground. All is covered with moss and a creeping vine.

"Prisoners have tried to escape through this scrub, scrambling over the top, but they eventually hit a soft spot and drop into deep holes of rotting scrub, which closes them into a trap with no way out. Never try that, lad.

"The entrance to the harbor is called 'Hell's Gate', and I'm told that those who don't drown while swimming in, later wish they had, for it's a living hell inside."

Harrington motioned Kurt to follow him out of earshot of the others, and they stood at the rail looking out over the restless ocean. "There is a way to escape to the mainland, lad. In a few minutes, I will take you to my quarters and draw a map. However, if you do succeed, you will become what is called a 'bushranger' with a price upon your head. To survive among the wild aboriginals, you would have to join gangs of other escaped convicts. The other choice is to become a bounty hunter, hunting for both the aborigines and the bushrangers. Possibly, you could in time, earn your freedom."

They started down the steps to the main deck below. The sergeant stood at the bottom with the minister between two of his guards. "Captain, we are within the shore limits, and in my jurisdiction," he challenged. "These two convicts will now receive the same treatment as the others below. I will personally discharge them to the colony, where I am also to be stationed."

The captain bristled, and then relaxed, looking at Charles Stuart helplessly. "I'm sorry, my friend. This officer is within his rights." He looked at Kurt with a wordless message. The young man stepped beside the cleric quietly, avoiding trouble. He kept step as they marched below to a putrid cell full of waiting convicts who mouthed obscenities at the two men. Kurt faced the antagonistic prisoners with indifference, despising their vulgarity. Charles stayed close beside him, with face white and knees weak. His mind began to fill with a sense of hopelessness.

It was late afternoon when they were all herded upon the deck and the chains removed from their legs. The sergeant noticed that Kurt's iron collar was missing, and wondered who had removed it.

The ship was anchored between two promontories, and the harbor reached beyond into the interior of the land. Directly in the center stood a huge bald rock, projecting high over the boiling waters. Coming into view from around the lea side were several longboats. There was a mast on each, but the sails were

furled. Obviously they feared a crash if they came too close in the heaving seas.

Kurt watched calmly as a section of the *Elgin's* rail was removed and the convicts lined up single file. There was complete silence as the men looked down into the boiling waters below. Faces blanched as they realized jumping and swimming was expected. As the first craft approached within thirty yards, a convict protested, but he was pushed overboard with the butt end of a rifle. He went screaming into the water to sink out of sight, and then surfaced, swimming desperately toward the heaving longboat. He was dragged in by the reaching hands of the oarsmen from the camp.

One after another, the men went willingly or unwillingly. The Captain moved against Kurt and put an oilskin pouch into his hand. Kurt silently put it under his belt.

As the reverend was pushed toward the rail, he yelled, "I cannot swim!" Without prompting, Kurt immediately leaped to follow, and grabbed the floundering cleric. The water was icy cold, but to Kurt it was fresh and clean. He felt his body respond in exhilaration as he gathered the pale-faced little minister under his arm. With powerful strokes he made his way toward the waiting boats. As a huge wave carried him on its crest, he saw the last boat being secured to the side of the *Elgin* and a Jacob's ladder drop alongside the ship. The sergeant and his guards rapidly scrambled into the boat.

Kurt's temper nearly flared at the realization that this desperate swim had merely been a means to give the convicts a bath and exercise—and perhaps bring them to submission.

They topped another wave, and suddenly Kurt saw that a sail had been raised on the last longboat. They were being left behind! Desperately Kurt looked back at the *Elgin*. Her anchors were pulled home and the sails unfurled to the wind on the starboard quarter. The long voyage toward home had begun.

He felt a moment of panic, and then began to tread water while he studied the situation. Steeply forbidding cliffs lined the bay and breakers crashed onto the rocky shores. He glimpsed white sails as the boats disappeared behind the huge bald rock, heading for safe anchorage.

He heard thunder and then the rain commenced again. He saw that Charles' eyes were wide open in blind terror. Rolling over, he pulled Charles upon his back and, using his hands and feet as fins, let the rollers carry them toward the mouth of the harbor.

The little man was not a quitter. Though he was inexperienced and weak, he began to help by paddling his legs and his arms. As they rounded the big rock, it gave them a measure of protection from the wind, but they lost help from the waves. But with Charles helping, they finally made shore.

Two men reached down and helped them out of the water and onto the dock. Kurt looked up to smile and thank his benefactors when a rock-hard fist smashed into his face, knocking him over backwards into the water again. Recovering sluggishly, he moved toward the shore where he stood for a minute with trembling legs, watching as a big man took Charles by the arm, walking him toward a headquarters building. As he passed, the fellow shouted, "Trying to drown the little fella, be ye'. I'll teach ye." He shook his fist as he directed guards to bring Kurt along.

Slanting rain pounded into the muddy ground, causing puddles, and overflowing into crooked little streams that ended in the surf. Suddenly, a shaft of sunlight streaked from under a heavy cloud bank, turning the raindrops for a fleeting second into glistening diamonds. The sun slipped down beyond the horizon, and the diamonds changed into cold, icy pebbles. Kurt caught sight of the white specks of the *Elgin's* sails far out on the open sea.

He was shoved into a wooden building where other men were gathered, drying off and donning prison garb, which were called "Magpie" clothes. There were coarse, thin pants and shirt, with yellow and black legs. The cloth was coarse and scratchy, and there were two sizes: large and small. The large was a snug fit for Kurt's broad shoulders, and the trousers were inches above his ankles.

As he changed he surreptitiously transferred the oilskin packet. Charles stayed close to him, indignant that Kurt had been attacked.

"I told him that you saved my life, but he wouldn't listen."

"Forget it. Don't think about it." Kurt was abrupt.

The minister looked into his face and was concerned, for he seemed like a different man from the one who shared the small cabin aboard ship. It was as though Kurt's face was chiseled in stone.

Guards came through the shed, herding men down a corridor for interrogation. It was more than an hour before Kurt and Charles along with three other men were sent into the commandant's office.

Seated atop a raised platform was a man with a smiling monkey-like face that exposed large yellow teeth. A black patch was over one eye, and his feet were crossed. Kurt could see that he had a pegleg. He was said to be a former sea captain with a military rank. He preferred to be addressed as captain-sir. Seated next to him was the man who had smashed his fist into Kurt's face. He sat grinning, apparently enjoying the memory. The man carried a sort of nightstick, or club, carved with mystic symbols. It was obvious that the fellow prized this message stick. He rubbed his hand back and forth over the smoothly polished ends and stared at the prisoners.

Also present was a Chinese cook in charge of the camp food. He was moonfaced, with stiff black hair, and no wrinkles or scars. His only weapon was a shining meat cleaver, a memento of his past skills. It was said that unfriendly pirates had gelded him, but no one knew for sure.

Charles was finally warm, and even hungry. He wondered what the fare would be, and felt that whatever it was, it would be welcome to his stomach. He saw the big man, called Bull by the others, was smiling at him, and he nodded his head in friendly response. No doubt there was a misunderstanding somewhere, else why would he hit Kurt? He looked around him with interest, thinking that these men were a part of his new flock. True, they were hardened by life's misfortunes, but underneath, he was sure that they were just misguided children. Perhaps his life had been preserved for just this purpose, to touch the hearts of these men. A faint stirring of hope was beginning to swell in his breast. Perhaps his life was not hopeless after all.

The commandant shifted his feet and leaned forward to

study the faces of the five men before him. It was his job to use his convicts in whatever way seemed suitable to keep them under control. At last he spoke. Charles paled, stunned by the torrent of filth that spewed forth. He wanted to demand that the officer still his foul tongue. He felt degraded.

The captain pointed his horny finger at the cleric. "You look like a bloke with boils on 'is 'arse. Stand still or I'll lay a few stripes on yer back."

Bull laughed with delight, and Cricket, the cook, showed his pleasure in a faint smile. The captain leaned back in his chair and took a deep drink from a bottle beside him. "I've never seen sorrier-looking scabs in me life than the lot that's come on this trip," he growled. "Worthless lot o' scum. Now I want each of you to tell me your name, what you're here for, and what work you've done, if any. No lies, mind ye. I've got yer records. Nothing can hurt your chances here, there's nowhere else for you to go. We've a few simple rules, and ye'd damn well better remember what I say. One—if you kill anyone, either another prisoner or a guard, ye'll hang instanter. Two—if ye decide on a walk into the 'never, never,' when ye come back we'll shoot ye'. Three—Bull here runs the work crews. Don't bung yer act, lads. Bull is real touchy, and red-shirts are a common sight. Remember the rules: One, Two, and Three."

Charles was sweating and yet he felt chilled. Never in his wildest imagination had he realized that such evil-spirited men lived. The bottomless pits of hell could surely be no worse. He did not hear what the men replied not even his own, and he was surprised when the captain told him to remain behind.

"Ye are an eddicated man, reverend, and I've needed someone to do my clerking and letter writing. The lad that was doing the work got problems with Bull." He turned to the big man, "You keep your greedy hands off the preacher, here. Howsomever, if the little basteed fails me, then he's all yours."

Bull ran his appraising eyes over Charles' slender frame, and gave him a mithless grin. "I'll be watching you, preacher." He rose and followed the other men, moving rapidly toward the blacksmith shop. The fires from the forge reflected against the sweating faces of men pumping the bellows. Sparks flew from

the blackened ceiling, and the coal smoke lay about in thick layers. Two men were fitting leg irons to the convicts. Bull elbowed his way into the circle of light from the fire. He had an ugly grin on his face, as he held up a bar with links of chain.

"Bring over that big Jew," he yelled and then added, "Leg spreaders, me own creation, and this lucky bloke will be the first to wear 'em."

The sergeant made his way through the men to Bull's side, "This belongs to the Jew. We'd better fasten it back on him so that he doesn't lose it again." The officer grinned wolfishly as he held up Kurt's neck collar. Bull bellowed with laughter.

With guards surrounding him, Kurt was forced to remain quiet while foot-irons were hammered into place. Then he was forced to stand. He could hardly balance himself, for his legs were forced wide apart by a solid bar of iron.

"Clear the way," Bull thundered, "He needs room." The men made a path, and the big guard stepped up behind and gave a hard push. Kurt stumbled and fell, and the room was filled with laughter. As he rose, Bull held him down. "Stay, dog, while we put your collar back on you. Every dog needs a collar."

The blacksmith punched out the old rivets and soon had new ones that were red-hot. The collar was opened and fitted about Kurt's neck and closed. The white-hot studs were placed through the holes again. Smoke rose above Kurt's head, but he got to his feet, impassively. The men looked at him, realizing that his neck must be badly burned, and they silently turned their eyes toward Bull.

The man felt their contempt. Though the prisoners were the dregs of the human race and they revelled in brutality and vice, they did not condone cowardice, and admired courage. Bull growled at the guards as he turned to leave.

"Put him in the hole." He directed a look of hatred at Kurt. "There'll be a cat waiting for you when you come out, Bucko. You'll learn to respect your betters." He turned on his heel and left.

Kurt slowly followed the guards, barely able to keep his balance. They took him to a stone cell where the sickening smell of men long-confined assailed his nostrils. An iron door

was opened and he edged himself into the room sideways, for his legs were too far apart to go through the doorway walking forward.

The door shut with a loud "clang," and he heard the bolt slide home. He sank to the stone floor and sat with his head bowed for long minutes. At last he took a long breath and lifted his head heavenward.

His whisper was lost in the soundless darkness, "Oh God! Enough!" Then louder, rising almost to a yell, he lifted up his arms and cried, "Enough!"

A key was thrust into the iron lock of the door. The jarring metallic sound cut into Kurt's thoughts, and he dropped into a crouching position. He had kept his muscles toned with limited exercises during the long silent hours. When the big door opened, the rusty hinges screeched and rats scampered deep into the dark.

He covered his eyes against the light but glimpsed the heavy boots of the guard. His skin crawled at the sight of the whip. Pieces of lead had been hammered into the leather thong to give more of a cutting edge.

"On yer feet, scum!" He recognized Bull's voice. "It's time to settle up yer account. The lash is hungry for the meat off yer back!"

Kurt got awkwardly to his knees, making his stiffness and pain clear. When he saw the guard relax and step off balance he grabbed a fistfull of matted hair and rammed his head against the stone wall. Then he bound Bull's hands with the leather throngs of the whip. He tore off a piece of the guard's cloth shirt and jammed it deep into his mouth. The weight of Kurt's body held the fellow crushed against the floor as he fashioned the remaining cloth into the shape of a rope and tied the ends around his legs.

Kurt paused at the doorway and looked back on this hellhole in which he had been confined without light for three weeks. The wide eyes of the guard were staring fearfully at him from the floor.

Young Bolin felt a sudden sense of revulsion and loathing as he looked at this human animal, and he had a desire to stomp

him to death. But he turned away to slam the door shut, better to leave him.

He dropped the key through a grating. When the man was discovered, it would take a blacksmith many hours to break down the door and release him. He turned and walked boldly down the corridor and out into the courtyard.

It was late afternoon and the shadows were lengthening across the hard packed ground. No one noticed him, for all attention was riveted on the whipping wall. Prisoners hanging there, dangling from their wrists.

Though Kurt was a good distance away from the floggers, flesh and skin flew in his face.

"Keep yer faces front," yelled a guard. "Hey, wat have we 'ere?" He jerked at the man's hair and Kurt caught a glimpse of the minister, Charles Stuart. "This 'un's dead! Bull's done 'im in!"

Sickened, Kurt realized that a man who had given his whole life to save souls was himself dead. Violently he wished he had broken Bull's neck. But he dare not pause now. He walked boldly past the wall, ignoring the groans and the tremblings of those who waited for their punishment.

His mind was set on escape. With hope long gone for pardon he knew that the only freedom he would have would be by his own efforts. Guards were never posted because escape was said to be impossible. There were only the shark-infested water or the swamps that ran through hostile native villages. There were no other ways out of the island. If a man chose death, then that was up to him. But he did have the map that Captain Harrington had given him, and even death was preferable to the bestiality of life in this camp.

With no weapon of any kind, he stepped onto the faint trail that led into the outback. The ground was soggy and drops of water dripped down on him from the heavy foliage. He moved along easily, beginning to feel the exhilaration of freedom.

Suddenly Kurt saw a footprint in the mud at the same instant that he heard the sound of a gunshot. Total silence followed, and then the air came alive with the sounds of protest and alarm from the ground creatures and birds.

He moved quietly forward. It had to be a hunting party—but

they were not after game, for there was little meat here that would interest a white man. Yes, this had to be a manhunt!

Now Kurt moved quietly, realizing that he could be shot on sight. He also understood that as a white man, he was the enemy of the native aborigines. His only chance of survival was to keep track of both whites and natives and elude them. He looked up through the trees. Vaguely he knew that it was about two hundred miles to Hobart, and that his only hope of escape was to reach that city. He was determined that he would not be returned to MacQuarrie Harbor prison, no matter what!

A lusty voice yelled, "Hey, Tup, I got me an Abo!" The man was excited and Kurt caught a glimpse of him through the thick foliage. "I'll slice off his ears and collect my reward. Hey, there's a girl! I saw her first so she's mine," he yelled.

Her eyes wide in terror, a young woman ran along the path directly toward Kurt. She was young, her body beautifully formed. She wore only a grass skirt and her small well-formed naked breasts heaved with the effort to escape.

"She'll outrun ya'," called Tup. "Get outta the way and I'll wing her."

Kurt saw a big man running close by. Just as the man reached out to grab the girl, Kurt stepped from his hiding place, and she jumped to one side, tripped and fell. Kurt's fist crashed to meet the man's jaw, his head snapping sharply back and he fell to the ground with a broken neck.

Kurt grasped the girl's wrist, and he motioned urgently for silence. Though trembling with fear she gradually recognized his intention to help.

Quietly Kurt and the girl circled around and came back to a fallen native. Kurt picked up a knife from the man's waist and slipped it behind his belt. He felt a pulse and nodded. The bullet wound was serious, but not fatal, just smashing a rib. Carefully he lifted the native onto his shoulder. As the girl ran ahead, Kurt followed. After an hour they rested beside a stream of water, and with a torn strip of cloth from his own shirt, Kurt washed the man's wound and forced some liquid into his mouth, then gently washed his face. At last he opened his eyes and gazed blindly up at the red-haired giant above him. As his eyes focused, he tried to rise, but the girl hurried to his side and talked excitedly.

Kurt pressed a wet cloth to the wound and pointed to himself, "Kurt!" he said.

The girl did the same. "Col-Bee", then pointed to the injured man, "Nabaree."

Kurt's mind went to Byzas. In nine years the big Greek had been the only one who had proved to be a friend. There was no time for such thoughts. Now it was urgent that they leave this place. The attackers would still be near. Kurt again put the sick man across his shoulders.

Their next stop was the beach. There, the trail went over the cliff and Kurt could hear the pounding of the heavy surf. Col-Bee motioned him away from the trail and into the thick foliage. He peered over the blue-green expanse of the ocean, and thought of home and freedom.

Col-Bee came quietly back to them and she had three big turtle eggs in her hands. Nabaree was now watching, his deep-set eyes reflecting the sunlight shining off the open seas. The girl cracked one of the eggs and dropped the contents into his open mouth. She handed one to Kurt, and as she saw his hesitation, a smile played on her full dark lips. Kurt saw that she had pearly white teeth that were even and well-formed. She cracked the egg and tossing back her head, let the contents slide into her mouth. Then she turned to look challengingly at Kurt.

He followed her example with a straight face, and then glanced down at the wounded man. He saw the man's eyes studying the shackle scars on his ankles. Nabaree gave a signal. Col-Bee rose to her feet, and Kurt knew it was time to go. About sundown they entered a camp. Nabaree, weakened from loss of blood, was semi-conscious with his head lying on Kurt's neck. The girl moved swiftly, a few steps ahead of them. Suddenly she stopped and stared.

Two things were wrong. No one greeted them and there were no cooking fires. The little bark huts seemed empty and the ashes were cold. Kurt backed away, into the deeper shadows off the trail and waited with mounting tension. Raiders had struck!

At last Col-Bee returned, and he felt her panic. He didn't know what the relationship was between this girl and the injured man, whether he was husband, brother, friend, sweet-

heart, or a tribal member, but she seemed to have a concern for him beyond the *normal*. He knew that somehow he had to give the man rest, and there was a cold wind rising. They would need shelter and food.

Kurt turned back and made his way through the deserted camp, still carrying Nabaree. He chose a shelter and looked to the girl for approval. She nodded.

Kurt set Nabaree upon a pallet and stood up tiredly. Who could have caused the sudden evacuation? Suddenly he heard voices. Could a party of guards be following him? He had to know. His hand reached to touch the knife.

Carefully he made his way to the edge of the cliff and looked down on the scene below. An anchored boat lay rocking in the dark heaving waters. Shadowed by the mountains and with the sails lowered, he could not tell the size of the small craft. A circle of sailors gathered around a small fire in the sand. Loud laughter and good-natured curses were carried by the wind. This was the raiding party!

Kurt glanced up at the sky and saw that clouds were moving rapidly to cover the skies. These men might seek shelter in the village. He must return at once.

Nabaree called from within the hut, and Col-Bee hurried to his side. Kurt knew that she wished to know what he had seen and heard. As he came inside, Nabaree rose painfully on one elbow, then he spoke softly, though urgently to the girl.

She was protesting and Kurt understood. Nabaree wanted Col-Bee to go with Kurt and leave him behind. He was sure that he would die anyway. He did not want her to be caught and abused by the sailors. Kurt heard the sound of their angry words, and became aware that they were mates and deeply in love, married by whatever custom their tribes required, and that their angry words were symbolic of their concern for each other.

The hard splatter of rain reminded them all of the urgency of action. Kurt reached down and picked up the protesting Nabaree. Col-Bee led the way from the hut. The voices of men became louder as they neared the cliff. The girl put her mouth close to Kurt's ear, and though he did not understand her words, he knew they held gratitude. She touched her hand

against Nabaree's face in a soft caress. Too late Kurt realized her intent.

She climbed nimbly to the highest boulder. There she stood naked, letting the rain wash over her beautiful black body. The sailors were spellbound. There were murmurs of excitement as she raised her arms and the flash of lightning revealed her firm young breasts pointing heavenward.

She was drawing attention away from her husband. Kurt knew that he must not waste her sacrifice, and as the lightning flashed again, he saw that she had thrown herself down the cliff to the rocks below!

Nabaree had seen, and Kurt felt a great shudder shake his body. Something akin to a sob broke from the firm mouth as the weakened fists beat against Kurt's neck and shoulders. The man wished to follow his love.

Kurt knew, however, that the girl's wish must be carried out, and holding fast to his burden he put some distance between them and their enemies. Only a few hours before, he thought, he had walked out of the prison yard passionately angry at the death of the minister. Yet he had determined on freedom and killed a man to help the girl Col-Bee have hers. Now, she had thrown her life away, and he was carrying a stranger, more dead than alive, through the night. The rain beat against his face, the wind bent him almost double, thunder shook the earth, and lightning split the skies. He was cold, hungry and desperately weary. Yet he felt a sense of determination and gratitude. To God? No, it was not God. It was the wind and the rain and the burden on his back that stirred his resolve to beat the forces that seemed set upon destroying him.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Nabaree heard the solid and heavy pounding of the war drums, and gradually became aware that the pounding was in his head, just behind his eyeballs. He tried to raise his hand to his forehead, but he did not have the strength. Had he been able, he would have felt of his hot brow and known of the raging fever that was coursing through his veins. He lay there as though dead, but then his thoughts went to little Col-Bee, and the pain of his loss rose above the pain of his body. Again he could see his beautiful wife as she stood upon the rock with her arms raised heavenward. As the lightning had split the skies, she had raised her arms to the creator, and he had known that she was praying for him and not herself. Mercifully the night had plunged into pitch darkness and he had not seen her plunge over the cliff to the rocks below.

Yes, little Col-Bee was gone, and Nabaree willed himself to die also. It seemed that all of his people of the island would die, because that was the will of the white invaders. They would never be content until all the aborigines were killed or transported to the mainland. Now he, Nabaree, had killed a white man, and he would kill more if he lived. Today he had

been too careless. But then he and little Col-Bee had been in the first moon of their dream world, and they had been laughing and making love when the alarm had sounded within his head and he knew that white men approached. It had been too late to flee, and as he approached, he had felt the burning impact of a bullet. His mind had told him to spring to his feet and fight, but he had not been able to respond to his will, though he had heard men shout as they discovered Col-Bee. After he had felt the cold steel of the knife as it was tossed onto his back.

Somehow he must get the knife that the red-hair now carried in his belt. He opened his eyes just a slit. Then he could open his veins and let his blood return to mother earth. He had no will or desire to live. She would understand and welcome him as all mothers welcome their children.

The white man was sitting at the back of their shelter, his eyes closed, the knife was resting in his open hand. Nabaree studied the man's face for signs of wakefulness. The dark red hair hung down to the man's shoulders, and in the dimness of the early morning it seemed alive with strength and vitality. Nabaree knew of the strength in the strong arms of the white man. He had carried him for many miles during the storm, and the lines of this strength was reflected in the lines of his face.

Nabaree considered the question of why this man had risked his own life to save him, a wounded native. The man seemed to be at home in the jungle of growth. Yes, he was somewhat familiar with the outback.

Ordinarily Nabaree would have continued with his reasoning, but somehow now his mind was cloudy. His thoughts went again to little Col-Bee. She had given her life for his. If he killed himself, then she would have given her own life to no purpose. No, that was wrong. If only the terrible pounding would cease.

He felt his wrist grasped by the white man, and then he was lifted up and over the big shoulder. For the moment, the decision of whether he would live or die was taken from him as Kurt carried him away.

Kurt stopped by a clear stream, and stooped to gather a handful of moss. He washed his patient's wound, then packed it with the moss, binding it into place with bark from the myrtle

tree. He pulled Nabaree over to a big mountain ash and propped him up, then turned his attention to thoughts of food.

He watched quietly as red-winged parrots flew about them. Seed-eating sparrows were everywhere, hopping about in their quest for food. A kookaburra split the silence with its loud cackling laughter, stopping only long enough to dart from its perch and pluck a fat, slow-flying cicada from the air. Kurt watched him carry the insect to a limb where he contentedly devoured it.

Kurt had seen a slight movement in the brush nearby. Hopefully it might be game and thus a meal for himself and the injured man. He was rewarded when a wallaby hopped into view. It sat innocently on its hind legs, its broad tail giving it a graceful balance. With the dainty fingers of the front paws, it was plucking berries and eating them. Large furry ears pointed sharply upward, constantly flicking backward and forward, listening for danger signals. The black button eyes were wide and soft, and Kurt glanced at Nabaree. The man's eyes were looking intently toward the kangaroo but not directly at the animal. Kurt's thoughts silently commended him. It was the way of a good hunter, for to stare would frighten the game away.

Kurt rose slowly to his feet and silently moved downwind. He would circle around in back of his quarry. Glancing back at his companion, he was pleased to see him diverting the animal's attention by waggling his big toe gently. Kurt was able to make his kill. He used his knife to effectively prick the jugular, and, as the blood drained out, cupped his hands and gave it to Nabaree to restore his strength. Then he split the carcass and found the fresh liver. He cut this into small pieces, giving some to the injured man to eat while he carved the rest for roasting on the fire. The two men shared a feast.

At last Nabaree sat back with a sigh of contentment. "You are good cook." It suddenly struck Kurt that this native had spoken English. He turned and stared at the aborigine in amazement. A smile parted the native's dark lips. "English is not the sole possession of the whites. I was guide and hunter for Malcolm Beesley, your countryman, who hired me to accompany him when he and his crew mapped this island."

"When was that?"

"Two years ago now. However, since then, my people have been hunted like the animals. I said I never would speak your tongue again. But then I did not know that an Englishman would save my life. Since the prison has come, we have learned that not all white men are honorable."

"Come, Nabaree, we must leave this place. There are men who search for me also. Do we continue on this same trail?"

Nabaree nodded without speaking.

As the shadows lengthened, the clouds were building and then came a faint and mournful sound. Kurt at last stopped to listen. It was like a wind blowing through a tunnel.

Nabaree spoke in a husky whisper, "It is the didgeridoo of my people. If you listen, you can hear him tap the rhythm and message on the side of the wooden tube with a boomerang."

Kurt took a few steps forward and found himself looking into the dark painted faces of several abo warriors. A command was given and a spear was aimed at his chest.

Nabaree raised his head from Kurt's shoulder and looked at his brothers. There were shouts of joy as they recognized their brother and then gently lifted him from Kurt's back. Moving rapidly, they carried Nabaree along the path, leaving Kurt to follow.

The children discovered Kurt and followed him fearfully, for he was the first white man they had seen. That was obvious, as was their fear. He tried to show friendship, but their naked little bodies shrank back into the brush if his hand came close to them. At last they decided that he seemed harmless, and began to run around him in circles, getting daringly closer and closer.

As they came into the village, Kurt saw that there were many dwellings with family possessions hung from pole rafters. Now the evening cooking fires were burning and the dogs ran to join the children in their game. He teased them with smiles.

As the rest of the children tired of their game, Kurt sank down against a tree. A small girl came shyly up to him and accepted his extended hand. He rose tiredly and went quietly with her to the hut where Nabaree had been taken. The child carried a baby wombat that looked like pictures he had seen of koala bears. The little animal was quiet and friendly, and he

caressed its brown fur as it nuzzled its black-satin nose against his hand.

A very old man sat cross-legged beside Nabaree. He was treating the injured man with native herbs and balms.

For the next three days and nights, Kurt slept and ate beside his friend, able in this way to observe the family life of these people. The friendly little girl taught him a few words of their language and he was able to communicate with signs quite adequately. He noticed that many of the little children called Nabaree "Father." Obviously he had several wives, for many women came to care for him at different times. The whole community seemed like one large family.

On the third day Nabaree wanted to sit up and talk. The old man was introduced as the Old One. The little girl was Tona.

"Is Tona your daughter?" Nabaree laughed, "I have no children. Little Col-Bee was my only wife, and we were but in our first moon of marriage. She did not have time to give me a child." His face was sad. "It is custom for the children of our tribe to call the uncles 'father.' I told the council how you have saved my life. Now the 'Old One' wishes to speak into your ear."

Kurt nodded and turned to the old man.

"When I cry and shout, He shuts out my prayers." The old voice droned on as Kurt's memory recalled the Biblical words. The old voice went on, "Our enemies have opened their mouths against us. Fear and a snare is come upon us with desolation and destruction."

The trembling voice was silent and Kurt glanced sidewise and saw that the old eyes had closed and his head was resting with his chin against his thin chest. He looked then at Nabaree with a question. Surely an extermination edict against these people had not gone out.

Nabaree rightly interpreted Kurt's question, and nodded his head.

Was it possible that King George, sitting at his piano in his luxurious palace, would condone the systematic slaughter of innocent people? This land belonged to the crown. These people were the king's subjects. No, the king had not ordered this extermination. False reports, greedy men, and blinded

politicians were responsible. Surely the right words to right men would stop this slaughter! Someone had to try!"

Nabaree's quiet voice spoke, "There is nothing that can be done. We are a doomed people, my friend."

"If you thought that, why have you had me listen to the old man?"

"You have come among us. You are entitled to know that you are not safe with us. We blame ourselves, for in some way we have offended our Gods. Thus the white man is blameless." Nabaree's voice was calm and fatalistic.

"You are subjects of the King of England. He would never sanction the deaths of his subjects and fellow countrymen."

"Your king. Our king is far away and we cannot reach his ear. We have no one to speak the words."

"We can at least try."

"But what can we do?"

"It is surely evident, that for the next few days you can do nothing." Kurt saw a look of hope light up the dark eyes.

"What can we do?" Nabaree repeated.

Indeed, who would listen to a plea for these people—even if he could get to the right people in Sydney. But someone must try! And there was only himself.

At last he turned and looked down at his friend. Kurt wondered if he would ever know laughter and joy again.

Nabaree translated. "The 'old one' says God has sent you, a white man, with hair like the sun. He sees into the tomorrow. You will speak for our people. He does not see that they hear you, but you will cross the seas, you will speak with a voice of thunder, and at last will be heard! You are our friend and you will speak."

Kurt felt a stirring of the hairs on his neck. How absurd and childish they were to think that he could do anything for them. Nabaree was right, these people were doomed if they had to rely on someone like himself. It was ridiculous to think that God had anything to do with his being here like this. Why he, himself, was one of the hunted—just as they were. No, there was nothing he could do.

Nabaree's voice came softly to Kurt. "You will lead us to safety. We are your warriors. You must think of a plan that will save our people."

"I've got to get out and stretch my legs for a bit, Nabaree. You'll be all right for a time, won't you?"

"Yes, my friend. Think well of the charge that has been given to you this day. Our people need you to represent us. Go—and give thought to our needs. We will follow as you direct."

Kurt went from the hut restlessly, moving out of the camp and onto a trail that led to a high outcropping of rock. He sat down and gazed out over the horizon to where he could faintly see the ocean that surrounded the island and separated them from the mainland.

He glanced around him, fully expecting the child Tona to emerge from the wooded trail with her furry pet. She constantly followed him everywhere. Faintly, he heard a shout from the camp, and began to move back. Several small boys ran to meet him, motioning for him to hurry.

He entered Nabaree's hut to see the injured man struggling to his feet. "Tona is gone! We found a boot print where her trail ended. You must find her. Our warriors are ready."

"Only two," Kurt's voice was angry. "It could be an ambush."

"Aluk and Garnov will go with you. They were with me on the mapping expedition, and they can understand your tongue. They are trusted warriors."

Kurt grabbed a stone axe from the hut and led the way along the path that Aluk dictated. The two young warriors moved with long strides. Within a few minutes, Aluk motioned to broken grass and a small footprint, and then the deep mark of a man's boots. The trail disappeared into the brush, and the three men spread out. Garnov suddenly pointed with his bare toe. It was Tona's little pet, a dead wombat.

Aluk and Garnov darted about like frightened shadows, making no sound.

The wind had stopped and it was too quiet for Kurt's liking. Garnov came down a slope and toward him across the small stream. As he jumped he was caught in midair by a bullet.

Kurt dropped to the ground and scrambled back. His companion fell lifelessly to the ground. Everything became quiet again. Obviously the ambushers were well disciplined and there were no shouts of victory as they stood their ground.

Kurt was moving silently back toward the rocks, when he

heard a single scream that was cut off suddenly. He looked back and saw a man spring into sight for the fraction of a second. Aluk had killed an attacker with his spear!

Kurt turned back to move again when he saw a lookout. He had been careless and exposed himself.

Suddenly an arm encircled his neck to choke off his wind, twisting him around. There was a moment of silent wrestling before Kurt reached over his head and grasped the man's neck and chin and threw him down—hard! The only sound was the snap of a broken neck and the man sagged lifelessly. Kurt now had a rifle and ammunition, as well as a knife.

The fog was thick and Kurt moved carefully and slowly.

"That you, Rob?" A man loomed up before him suddenly, and Kurt silently buried the knife in the man's chest. There were three fewer attackers, but he didn't know how many of the enemy were still alive.

Suddenly a voice came out of the fog. "Drop your weapon! I have your little black girlfriend, and there's a knife at her throat. Come over very carefully, no weapons, and bring the black boy with you."

Kurt felt a cold chill . . . Bull . . . he recognized the voice. He wasn't bluffing. He dropped the rifle and the knife.

"I'm coming, but if you've harmed that child, I'll kill you."

Bull's deep rumbling laughter was his only answer.

Chapter Fifty-Six

All was silent. Was Tona actually a captive or was this a bluff? He had to find out, and that meant surrender. He took a step forward.

"Hurry it up. I'm getting tired of waiting for you to make up your mind."

"My black boy is dead. Your man killed him," Kurt lied.

Aluk called, "I have Tona. Only the one man remains alive. Do not move about."

Bull knew that his plan had backfired and he was alone; without any help to catch the convict Kurt Bolin. He must escape while the fog could shadow him. There would have to be another day. He moved with care and made his way down the mountainside toward the prison. While he longed for the safe security of the prison walls, he wanted more than anything than he had ever wanted in his lifetime to have the Jew before him at the whipping wall. He'd been sure that he had the fellow trapped. He had used his best men for this hunt; they were all well-armed. He had even bragged that he would not return until he could bring the Jew in chains and a bag full of abo ears. He must carefully again plan the capture of the man. It had

taken the prison blacksmith several hours to tear out the cell door and release him from that rat-infested hole where the Jew had left him. Yes, it was necessary to bring Boĭin in to show that resistance was not to be tolerated. His rage mounted again when he thought of how the prison doctor had nearly killed him when he had treated him for rat bites.

The sun broke suddenly through the mist and fog. Large drops of water dripped from the foliage overhead. A sobbing cry came and Kurt turned to catch the little girl as she threw herself against him. He sat down and comforted her until her sobs ended in hiccups. At last he set her on her feet and took her hand leading the way back to camp.

Boys dispatched to collect the guns and ammunition from the dead men. Two warriors were sent along Bull's trail. "It is not likely that you will find him before he reaches the camp. Now he will do everything possible to destroy us. It would serve our purpose if he could be killed," Aluk told Kurt.

That night everyone celebrated the safe return of the chief's grandchild. Kurt sat beside Nabaree, eagerly listening as the taboos and rituals of the aborigines were explained to him.

"The boys cannot dance until their initiation and acceptance as an adult. The rites of passage gradually introduce them to the secret myths and legends of our tribe."

"What do they consist of?" Kurt asked.

"Well, circumcision is one. Knocking out a front tooth is another. The cutting of the chest and arms to make the pattern of scars is another. "I have seen similar rituals in Africa," Kurt said thoughtfully.

"A boy suffers these ritual deaths so that he can be reborn a man." Nabaree said.

Aluk squatted down beside the two men. "My friend," said Nabaree, "Your life and service belong to Kurt. Serve him well so that he may help our people. Travel with and protect him. This man who alone can help our people. Serve him as I would, my brother."

There were no good-byes. Kurt and Aluk simply started out on their long and dangerous walk to the port city of Hobart. They knew Bull would use every means in his power to capture him. But it was a race to save these natives from the extermination that was moving against them.

Aluk knew the urgency of their mission. With small packs, boomerangs, and spears, Aluk and Kurt hastened along the trails. At last they reached the city. Many convicts were herded through the streets so Kurt and Aluk were not an unfamiliar sight to the merchants and farmers. Kurt found a barber who shaved off his beard, leaving his chin white compared to the rest of his sun-browned face. He then had his hair trimmed like the city people around him. At last he sank gratefully into a tub of warm, soapy water. Dressed again, he and Aluk strode off into the darkness of the city.

The barber eyed the two men as they walked away, and he fingered the silver coin Kurt had given him. It was the kind used in the prison—and yet the man did not have the look of a prison guard. He shrugged his shoulders. Oh, well, it was time to close up shop. He would check in at the police station. There were sometimes rewards out for escaped convicts, and certainly this big one with his red hair would be easy to identify. In the tub the red-head had shown the scars of whipping—and his black friend had the look of an abo. Yes, he'd best check it out.

He was turning the key in the lock when a hard-faced prison guard punched him playfully. He felt himself being lifted from the ground, "I want a shave, a haircut, and a bath, and I want it now, not tomorrow."

The barber stuttered, as he opened the door. Bull took his bath first, and then demanded a shave and a haircut.

"Ya gotta place like a pigsty. Whyn't ya ever clean it up?" He looked around and his eyes fell on some red hair on the floor. "Were'd the bloke go who just left here?" he demanded.

The barber's face was white with fear. He remembered the coin that Kurt had given him, and dug it from his pocket. "He gave me this."

"Dead men's silver, that's what it is. I'll have him before this night's over." Jubilantly, Bull catapulted out into the street, shouting for his men.

Kurt and Aluk entered a dry-goods shop that catered to miners and farmers. Kurt bought himself a wide-brimmed hat, boots and coat. For Aluk, he purchased a big red handkerchief which he knotted on his head. "You look like an African slave now, my friend. Act dumb and say nothing—and keep close to me."

"That should be easy, boss man," Aluk grinned. Now they entered a nearby hotel. "Miss, I would like a room for the night," Kurt told a blond woman sitting behind a desk.

"Just a room? Or would you like a little company?"

Kurt nodded at Aluk, "I'm not alone tonight." He grinned at her.

The smile left her face, "He'll have to sleep on the floor," she stated. "No slaves sleep in my beds." Sourly she collected money for the night's lodging and then added, "One free beer with the room, mate."

"Not tonight, thanks, I have some work to do."

On the wall in back of the clerk he could see a printed advertisement of the Performance of Miss Mary Robinson. Suddenly he wanted desperately to visit the theater. The actress meant home—London—his boyhood. There was a calm determination to see Miss Robinson. She had given her bright smile to a boy who was consumed with uncertainty and terror in the streets of London. Yes, he would see her. "Where are we going?" Aluk asked calmly as he followed Kurt.

"I'm not sure yet. We must find passage to the mainland immediately. I also want to go see an old friend at the theatre. After that, we'll decide what is best to do."

When they reached the theatre, carriages were lined up and their passengers were being helped to the walkway by servants and doormen. Torches lit the marquee into a daylight brilliance.

Though he was intrigued, Aluk was mystified by what he saw. "You look just like a scared African slave, my friend," Kurt laughed softly at the black man. "Just don't panic and bolt."

The abo's eyes were as round as half crowns, and he enjoyed the brilliance of the jewels, and the heady scent of perfumes. It was an alien world indeed for a man from the bush.

A large portrait of the actress dominated the lobby. She was even more beautiful than Kurt remembered her. "Let's walk onto the harbor, Aluk. We can find out what ships are bound for Sydney."

The native nodded and followed a few steps behind Kurt. From the wharf, the two men saw many ships looming above

them with masts sticking high up into the clear cold skies. Kurt studied each one, trying to remember the names and picking up snatches of conversation from the seamen.

Aluk touched his arm, "We are being followed," he whispered softly.

"Hide in this pile of cargo. I will go to the end of the wharf, and we'll see what happens."

Aluk nodded and disappeared as Kurt walked on, apparently unaware of being followed. As he neared the last ship he ducked down and waited. Soon he heard heavy footsteps and Bull's deep chuckle.

"You are trapped, bloody Jew. Do you come out peaceable like or do I come and get you?"

Kurt stepped out to face his enemy. Bull held out his hands to show he had no weapons. Flexing his huge biceps, he smacked the muscles of his left arm. The sound rang out like a gunshot. Bull was going in for the kill!

Kurt's foot slashed out and the blow sent the guard over the side into the water below. Aluk was at Bolin's side as they heard the splash. "You should have killed him. Now he will be on our trail, yet harder than ever."

Aluk was right, of course. It wasn't even safe to go back to their rooms now. On a sudden impulse, Kurt moved toward the end of the wharf and walked toward the theatre. He slowed to a walk just before they reached the stage door. Kurt flipped a coin into the air for the doorman to see in the flickering torchlight. The man gave him a smile and touched his finger to the bill of his cap as they entered into the dim confines of the backstage area.

They could hear the actors, and a glance showed Kurt that everyone had their attention on the stage. A door with a star painted on it was partly open. Silently the two men entered. There were costumes, makeup table, and mirrors as well as a chair and table which held a bottle of wine. A curtain partially concealed trunks and several small boxes.

The smell of cosmetics and cold cream reminded Kurt of his mother's room. He was wondering if he should involve the lovely actress in his problems when he heard a sound at the door.

A man entered, obviously not an actor, for he wore no

makeup. Perhaps he was a local admirer. The fellow picked up the wine bottle and held it to the light for a moment, then nodded his head. He then took a large white silk handkerchief from his white velvet jacket and polished two glasses to his satisfaction, then glanced around before he left.

Aluk put his knife back in his belt sheath as Kurt let out a breath of relief. Before the door closed, they could hear the loud explosion of applause. They could hear the tap-tap of high heels and the swish of silk as Mary Robinson came into the room, followed by the gentleman in the white jacket.

"Oh, Ralph," she exclaimed as she saw the wine, "You are so sweet, but, darling, you must give me time to dress! And I must take off this makeup. I shan't be long, my dear." She went up on her toes and brushed a kiss against his cheek.

Kurt could see a vein in the man's neck pulsing at Mary's gesture, before she delicately moved away from his clutching hands. "I'll be just outside, Mary. Don't be long, my dear."

As he opened the door and went out, a maid stepped inside and moved with fluid grace to assist her mistress. The actress said a little impatiently, "Not now, Marie. I'll call you later. I must be alone for a few minutes."

It was with difficulty that the maid was able to exit through the mass of people at the door. Messengers were there with flowers and the town's society had gathered to pay homage to the beautiful actress from England. A young admirer decided to force his attentions and pushed at the door, trying to enter the room. Mary, dismayed, put her small hands against the door, trying to get it closed and locked.

A big hand came to assist and she controlled an outcry as she looked up into the darkly tanned face of a giant. The man's strong white teeth showed in a pleasant smile, and her fear left.

"Have you been sent to protect me?" she asked with a flirting smile.

"No, Miss Robinson," Kurt answered with a grin, "It is I that needs *your* protection."

"Me? Protect you? But how can that be? And should I?"

"I don't know—I hope that you will. You see, I saw you once in London, and I have carried your picture in my heart every since." He tapped his breast.

The actress flashed him a smile and then turned to sit at her

dressing table. She began to cream her face, knowing that the sticky stuff was a good deterrent to emotional outbursts from men. She had heard such things before. "Oh yes, and you have never been able to find another to take my place."

"Not under the circumstances, Miss Robinson," Kurt answered quietly.

"What circumstances?" she demanded a little uncertainly, and then her eyes widened with a kind of fear as Aluk stepped from the shadows behind the curtain.

Kurt saw her fear and hastened to answer, "Miss Robinson, I did not intend to thrust myself upon, but my life is in your hands. Please trust that we mean you no harm."

The woman stared at Kurt for a long moment and then briskly picked up a towel and wiped off the cream. She rose and turned to face him, "Wait here. Don't leave, I will be back in a few minutes." She pushed him behind the curtain and hurried from the room, locking it after her.

Kurt and Aluk sat down on a trunk in the dark. As Mary went through the door, they heard sounds of applause and approval. Finally, the two men could hear only the creaking silence of the empty theatre.

"Where could she have gone in such a hurry?" Aluk's voice asked. "We had best leave. This is a trap from which we could not escape," the abo insisted.

Kurt nodded reluctantly, and then opened the door a fraction to see if the hall was clear for their escape. He saw Mary Robinson busily signing autographs for the milling people around her. Ralph hovered close, showing satisfaction at the adoration she received.

Aluk was nervous, and again he grunted, "I do not like. We leave!"

Kurt nodded. The room was hot and stuffy. He peeped through the door then suddenly thrust it softly shut.

Aluk looked at him questioningly and Kurt softly hissed, "Two policemen!" His eyes searched for a way of escape, but there was no way but the door.

The two men moved back against the wall, their fists clutching their knives, and their eyes burning with anger. They heard an urgent tapping at the door, and the actress' voice rose, "Marie! Open the door now for you have nothing to fear.

We have two policemen standing guard here, and they will surely see that no escaped convicts gain entrance to harm us."

Kurt understood and the door eased open. He felt great relief that Mary Robinson had not betrayed them. He could see her wisdom in calling the police to assure that the prison guards did not bother her. His eyes began to sparkle at the thought that she was actually declaring her interest in their problems. Perhaps she would give them the help they so desperately needed.

As the actress came through the door, her eyes were alight with excitement. She gave a visible shudder as she noticed the knives in their hands. "Tell me quickly," she asked the two men, "for I have but a few minutes. Why are you here—and hunted? What have you done? Why should I help you?" Her eyes sparkled as she teased Kurt, "Apart from this undying passion that you conceived on the streets of London. Just tell me now why you are hunted."

Kurt looked down at this lovely woman, and though Kurt knew that she was about thirty-five to his twenty-five, he felt a stirring within himself to her beauty—her perfume.

"Well?"

Kurt answered briefly. "Aluk's people are under orders to be—exterminated."

Mary's eyes flashed in consternation.

"I have escaped from the prison camp," he added.

"Why were you there? Murder? Stealing?"

"Stealing," his voice was quiet and dry.

"Guilty?" she asked briefly. She could not conceive that a man such as this would have need to steal. He had the strength and the—power—to attain much.

"No," he said and his eyes met hers steadily.

She took a deep breath. "All right then, how can I help you?"

Kurt told her of their need to get to Sydney. "I must reach there quickly if help is to come in time to help Aluk's people."

"And what of the little girl you tell me of? Send for her and I will protect her until you can get help."

"We cannot go back, Miss Robinson. Every hour is of the utmost importance to these people. Besides, there are many such small girls, and you cannot take them all to safety. Help us

to get to Sydney, and I promise you I will somehow find a way to stop this."

"But what of the thousands of convicts like yourself—the political prisoners, those who have done no wrong."

Kurt's voice was grim. "That matter will have to be faced at a later date. The aborigines' problems are even more immediate!" Mary sighed, "I don't see what just one man—and his friend—can do. What can I do to help? You certainly won't be safe here for long." Before Kurt could answer, she clasped her hands together in excitement, "I have just had a brilliant idea. Stay here and I will return as quickly as I can. You do trust me, don't you?" She saw a leaping awareness and a hunger in his eyes. Laughing softly, she went to the door, and hurried through. Kurt locked it after her.

Ralph came to meet her with a glass of champagne but stumbled on some ropes that stretched across the stage. He checked his fall, but the sparkling wine flew over Mary's dress.

"Madame! C'est pauvre!" cried her maid.

"Yes, it is a shame!" The actress stood quietly as Marie dabbed at her dress. As she worked, Mary spoke quietly to the woman, and Marie nodded her head.

"Oui, Madame."

Mary Robinson looked at her outfit with a wry smile, for though her dress was ruined, still she had the excuse she needed to free herself from Ralph.

"I will buy you a dozen dresses," he exclaimed. "Please forgive the clumsiness."

Mary put her hand on his arm. "Don't be upset. But you will understand that I have a headache now. I am sure that you will forgive me for resting this evening?"

Ralph kissed her small white hand forgivingly.

The two policemen stepped aside to allow her to reenter her dressing room.

Meanwhile Kurt had been wondering how they could board ship to Sydney. His own size and coloring, and with Aluk beside him, made disguise impossible. He looked up when Mary came back into the room and drew aside the curtain. She had only just shut the door when a quiet knock was heard.

Mary whispered urgently, "Please be very quiet and just listen."

She turned and opened the door. "Oh, Val, my dear. Come in, do!" From his hiding place, Kurt could see a tall gentleman enter.

"Marie said it was urgent. What have you done now?" His voice was calm and yet carried a hint of indulgence.

"Oh, Val, I need your help!"

"Of course, my dear, you always do."

The actress told of Kurt and Aluk's journey. A smile came into his eyes as he watched her intense emotions. Indulgently he thought she was always ready to embrace a cause. Now he was anxious to meet the two men, and he nodded his head.

A joyous burst of satisfaction escaped her lips and she went up on her toes and pulled his head down to hers and kissed him. With a wry smile on his face, Val accepted her token of appreciation with the often repeated wish that her kisses meant more than a casual gesture, easily given.

Kurt himself was a little embarrassed at the flash of jealousy he felt. He managed a smile and extended his hand.

Val's voice was cool as he said, "Well, I'd best make the necessary arrangements. I will see you in a little while." He left quietly.

Kurt was disturbed. "It seems that our hiding place is no longer hidden. It could become our trap. Are you sure that you can trust your friend? Or husband? Is it possible that he will give us away?"

"No, he would not betray me—" she paused.

Kurt's voice was low, "Not you—us!"

"Valentine Lauderdale is one of those rare men of whom nothing but good is ever spoken. He read for the bar, but never practised law. In fact, he is wholly worthy. The only thing that Val lacks is ambition, but he was rich enough through inheritance. He lost much of his wealth through a lofty adventure. He helped to finance the return of slaves from Canada to Freetown, South Africa. When they were brought back to their homes, it was hoped that they would be able to farm as free men and eventually return the money. However, they seemed to prefer the easier life of accepting the British dole support rather than their freedom.

"He has been a patron of the theatre, and is our director, and a good one. He is your best hope."

Kurt's thoughts were churning. Val was more closely involved with him than he dreamed. He had been one of those who had brought freedom to Moses and hope to hundreds in Freetown. Now he could give life to the aborigines of Tasmania—if they were in time.

"Another thing, Val is not my husband. I am not married. He is an old and very dear friend. He will not only be the means of helping you escape, he will put you in touch with the right people to see in Sydney. We are here for only the one more day, and then we too leave for the city."

"Is it your plan that we go with you?" Kurt felt vast relief at this possibility.

"If Val can arrange it."

Some time later, the keen ears of both Aluk and Kurt heard Val approach the room. He tapped softly on the door before they opened it.

Though he had committed himself to helping these two men, he felt that they were dangerous. The man Kurt had been fashioned into a hard and cynical man of overwhelming strength and energy. The abo, Aluk, was a savage—perhaps even a cannibal. He motioned them to follow him. There were a few lanterns burning yet, and Kurt and Aluk both saw three men, headed toward the room they had just left. Val quietly stepped behind some stage scenery and Kurt and Aluk quickly followed.

The men came into view and Kurt had a shock as he recognized Bull. His arm was splinted and held across his chest with a cloth sling.

Kurt had no physical fear of the man, but he knew that capture would mean return to prison and sure death.

Bull impatiently opened the door and entered. Two policemen followed him closely. Bull's voice was strident, "Those bloody murderers have been here! I can smell an abo and a convict a half mile away! Why didn't you report this sooner, you bloody fool?"

"But sir, we were only relieved from this duty a short time ago."

"Duty? What duty?"

"We were posted to see that Miss Robinson was not

molested while she changed. She was frightened because a convict was on the loose around here."

"You refused to allow my men to search these rooms? You bloody fools! They were no doubt hiding while you were protecting them—not her! Guard the theatre entrance—the main one at the front. No one enters and no one leaves, understand? If you see those criminals, you shoot to kill! Now take your post."

One man responded reluctantly. This prison bully had no authority over him. But perhaps it was best to try to get along until he was gone.

Bull turned to the other guard. "You are posted to this door. The same instructions apply. No one leaves, and no one enters. Kill them if you see them! That convict must be found!"

As the men disappeared from sight, Val tugged at Kurt's arm, leading them to a basement stairway. They emerged at last in a stockroom where costumes hung from hangers on rods. On the outside wall was a single window whose sill was on ground level.

Kurt pulled a chair to the window, climbed onto it and stared out into the night. He saw the blocky figure of Bull as he walked toward the city's main hotel. He tried the casement and lifted the glass.

"What are you planning?" asked Val. "I must disguise and hide you at once!"

"Miss Mary may need help. Where is her room located in the hotel?"

The director wished fervently that Mary had never gotten involved with this odd pair. "Second floor, front corner left. You could be seen and shot," he warned.

Kurt didn't answer as he wriggled through the open window. "Put it down now but don't lock it. I'll be back as soon as I can, before daylight for certain."

Aluk watched his friend disappear into the darkness, then he turned toward Val. "Disguise?" he asked.

Kurt watched the actress' lamp go out, and then made his way back to the window. He stayed close to the brick wall of the building. Suddenly a cat slipped past his feet, her shadow giving him a start. He crouched close to the paving and listened

silently. Perhaps he was being overly cautious, but survival required never taking anything for granted. He kept his head back away from the open glass and waited for a sound from within. At last he heard footsteps cross the basement floor below. They were not Val's soft leather soles, nor were they made by the sandals Aluk wore. Kurt backed slowly away and crossed the street like a shadow to fade into the gloom of a doorway. His muscles leaped involuntarily as a whisper came to his ear.

"The place is full of those who wish our scalp and the reward of the prison guard. Follow me. We will find the ship." Aluk moved ahead, keeping in the shadows and moving silently.

They reached the wharf and Val whispered, "There is your ship. A dozen men looking for you. We must find a way to get you aboard secretly."

Kurt looked up at the dark lines of the craft, and he was able to make out the letters of her name. It was *Elgin*! If Captain Harrington still commanded her, all was well.

"Spread out, men," shouted one of the guards. "It will soon be light and we can run the bloody red-haired convict to earth."

Kurt felt his insides convulse with fear. They must not be caught!

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Aluk gave a snort of contempt as the shouts of the hunters came to their ears, and Kurt's muscles bunched in readiness to defend his life. The sounds of bootheels on the wharf planks came toward them, passed by, and then receded.

It was obvious that the motley group had been recruited from the grog houses with a free drink and the promise of a reward. The drinks had begun to wear off during the long hours of the night, and the men were in an ugly mood. Any one of them would have been surly and cowardly, but as a pack they were arrogant and brave. The two men fugitives had been seen going toward the harbor and the pack was eager to find them and have a hanging.

"All right, you blokes, they're here. Search among the cargo and yell if you see them. Remember they are armed—and will fight for their lives."

Kurt saw a craggy giant of a man stop near their hiding place. He was outlined against the morning sky and seemed confident and indifferent to danger. Kurt smelled pipe smoke and saw him stare under his bushy eyebrows in their direction.

"Lower your weapons, lads. Val sent me to get you aboard the ship," his voice came softly. "I'll create a diversion at the end of the wharf, and you make a run for it. The lads aboard will be watching to help you if need be." As he turned to leave, he took the pipe from his mouth and tapped the tobacco out of it. "I am called Shell. I'll see you aboard."

As the man moved briskly away, they moved forward. Shell broke into a jogging run, waved his arms and pointed, then shouted in a voice that carried like a first mate at loading time.

"The bloody murderers are this way. Help! Come before they are lost. Men, we've got them cornered!"

There was a brief silence and then the pack picked up the cry and ran to be in on the kill. As the last man thundered by, dragging a coil of hanging rope, Kurt and Aluk made a dash for the gangplank of the *Elgin*. A small spry figure of a man stood at the rail with men close behind him.

"Hurry, lads. You've no time to spare."

Kurt's eyes lit up, for he recognized one of the few men in his life that he respected—Captain Harrington!

As Kurt lunged onto the deck, the captain stood back and gave him room. He broke into a big grin and held out his hand, "Bolin! I knew it was to be an escaped convict, but I never dreamed that I'd lay eyes on you again." He pumped Kurt's big hand up and down, then pulled the young man toward his cabin. "Step lively, lad. You may have been seen. Rusty, you stay here on watch with Ben and Harry and report anything unusual to me at once."

Kurt noted the respect that the men had for their captain—except for the man Rusty. He had seen him before, but the name was different. There was something . . .

They hurried into the captain's quarters, and he looked about him at the familiar scene. Lanterns were competing with the first rays of the morning sun as it glistened across the restless ocean, and Kurt felt at ease for the first time in several days.

Aluk backed up against the wall, his face reflecting his awe. He had never been on a ship before. What was past was past, was the abo philosophy, and he now faced the present with alertness and interest.

"Captain, this is my friend Aluk. He goes with me to Sydney."

"Welcome aboard, lad. Mr. Lauderdale told me of the attacks on your people. I have traded some with the aborigines and I have always found them to be friendly and honest."

Aluk's eyes lit up and he stood straight with pride.

A meal was brought to them and the captain left to see about the loading of his cargo. Aluk stretched out on the bunk and fell instantly asleep. Kurt went to the porthole and watched idly as a knot of men gathered at the end of the wharf. They seemed to be staring at some object.

Two policemen shouldered their way through the crowd. Suddenly his breath stuck in his throat. Aluk had somehow sensed his tension and moved silently to his side. Kurt muttered incredulously, "It's the man Shell! They've hung Shell!" Anger burst like a flame inside him and he drove his fist into the plank. "Why? Why? Why?" he exclaimed.

Aluk tried to understand his friend's concern for a stranger. The man had died doing what he had chosen. He had given them the chance to live. Thus he would be honored among the great spirits for his service. What more could any man ask? To live to become old and full of pain and then to die only because of weakness. Aluk shook his head. He was willing to face danger every day and hope that when his time came to die, he would be able to make of his final hour a noble one.

Kurt came to look out again, saw Mary Robinson, below. She was surrounded by performers from her troupe as well as maids and technicians. He forgot his anger. She had sacrificed so much to help out. What a beautiful woman—in spirit as well as form. He watched her grace and her loveliness. He felt the muscles of his body tighten and respond at the sight of her. What did it matter that she was years older, she was still beautiful and must have a—regard for him, since she was helping so much. He felt his pulse quicken as her eyes met his. He could almost feel her presence, and he was like a starving man, his awakened desires reaching for life-giving nourishment. Now he felt like a caged animal, wanting to be free to greet her, to touch her hand, to kiss the white fingertips. The thoughts stirred within him. He wanted to touch her hair, those

silken strands that waved in the breeze so beckoningly. And he wanted to have her sweet eyes look up at him with surprise, and then to run with delightful laughter into his arms. And he wanted to touch the satin smooth skin of her shoulders and move his hands over her lovely curves.

Kurt's thoughts were so intense that he must cry out. He turned blindly toward the door to open it and call to her.

Aluk moved like a cat to stop him.

Kurt paused, "Move!" he ordered. To be frustrated now was unendurable. He had always been involved with other peoples' needs. Saving a man had brought him to this alien land. He was pained at the sense of loss he felt for the life he might have had. In his mind he saw her tantalizing smile and laughing eyes as a doorway to a fuller and richer life. He had to take it. The handle of the door turned quietly from the outside and Aluk moved easily aside. Mary Robinson stepped over the high threshold into the room. The scent of her perfume preceded her, and her low throaty laughter seemed to fill the cabin. Without saying a word, she turned and continued her conversation with the captain.

As she talked, Kurt could see that she had used powder and makeup to cover a small bruise on her face. She must have sustained it last night. His rage nearly erupted. "Val has promised to take me to New York, sir. They say that the sea voyage is almost intolerable but that the reception in New York will be well worth the effort. How are their theatres, captain?"

Mr. Harrington answered in an indulgent voice. "Well, my dear, I have never been to a performance in New York, though I know the port well. However, my dear, should you be playing there, I should certainly not be restrained from attending."

Mary put her arm on the captain's gold-braided sleeve, "You sailors are all alike. Living on the sea seems to give you a charm and ruggedness that is found nowhere else. I feel most fortunate to be on your ship, for I have heard wonderful things about you."

Kurt was feeling slightly sick. He was jealous of her fawning rapport with the captain, and sick over her total lack of interest in himself. In fact, he was feeling his first experience with the game of love. How could Val be taking her to New York?

Did they indeed have some relationship that went deeper than director and actress? And the way the captain was reacting to her smiles—well, at the very least, he lacked dignity.

Suddenly Mary gave him her full attention, as she reached out to twine her small delicate fingers in his rough calloused hand, and drew him around to look up into his eyes. Her voice was soft as she said, "I am so glad that you are safe, Kurt. I have been worried about you."

Still holding Kurt's hand, she turned to Aluk and smiled, "And you, too, my friend."

Kurt thrilled at the touch of her hand, and all of his feelings of love returned. He felt the abo's cold eyes on him, and the captain was silent. "How soon do we sail, sir?" he managed at last to ask.

"On the outgoing tide, lad—less than one hour."

Mary spoke gaily, "Mr. Harrington tells me that you have been aboard ship with him before, Kurt. You must tell me all about it, of course." She withdrew her hand, then turning to the captain, saying, "I should go to my cabin. Marie and I must get unpacked before we leave port. She always seems to develop the sea malaise the minute we lose sight of land."

Kurt stepped forward to open the door but the Captain was there before him. "Take no chances, my boy. All except my cabin is subject to search as long as we are tied to the dock. Relax, sleep a little. I can see you are in need of it."

Mary stepped through the open door without a backward glance. He peered through the porthole and moodily watched them walk forward, smiling gaily at each other.

At last his attention was caught by a commotion at the foot of the landing. Passengers were coming aboard, laughing and weeping, and all struggling with what seemed to be mountains of luggage. At one side a partially hidden cargo was waiting to be loaded, and he caught a glimpse of Val next to a policeman. There seemed to be some argument, for the director was raising his arms in protest. Then Kurt saw Bull! He moved toward the gangplank!

Kurt heard the sounds of running footsteps, and Val was literally shoved up the plank, as the policeman and Bull followed. By the time they reached the deck, the captain had

taken his place at the rail. Val showed his boarding pass, and the policeman showed papers from the court authorizing search of the ship. "I'll allow you aboard under certain conditions," said the captain.

"You are under port authority and they have approved this search. Now stand aside, captain," shouted Bull.

Crewmen with pistols in their belts, stepped forward to stand behind their captain.

"As I was saying, gentlemen, there are conditions. Or would you prefer not to come aboard?"

The captain was stalling for time, but the would-be boarders could not be denied for long. Kurt glanced at the cargo to be loaded from the dock. There were only a few crates left, and the passengers were saying their final goodbyes. He studied Bull's angry face. The man would obviously have to agree to the captain's restrictions, whatever they might be. Time was running out, and this was a big ship to search. He saw Bull glance at the crewman, Rusty. The man deliberately moved his eyes to indicate a search of the captain's quarters was needed.

Kurt turned and looked at Aluk. No words were spoken, for both men knew what they had to do. Aluk took a stone axe from the captain's collection of ancient weapons. Kurt grabbed a loaded pistol. They took defensive positions beside the door.

Voices could now be heard outside. They tensed, ready for action. Kurt's subconscious tried to bring Rusty's true identity to the surface. The name didn't fit, somehow. The man's hair was black and his complexion dark. The nose had been sunburned and now a few freckles showed. Wait a minute! Suddenly the whole puzzle flew together just as the door opened with a burst.

Young Bolin was caught off-balance. The pistol in his hand was knocked aside, and Bull's face lit up in sadistic pleasure as he jabbed a gun hard into Kurt's belly. His finger was tightening on the trigger, when suddenly, the stone axe crashed against his skull. The gun in Bull's hand exploded harmlessly as the man fell to the floor, his forehead crashing against Kurt's leg.

The policeman elbowed his way into the room. His face turned ashen with shock as he saw the glowering black savage

with the stone axe in his hand. Bull was stretched out on the floor with a bloody head. Could he be dead? The officer's fingers relaxed suddenly and his pistol dropped to the floor. He could not speak. "I instructed them to start their search in the hold, but they insisted on searching my quarters first, said Mr. Harrington.

Two men appeared in the doorway, "Captain, the tide is going out, and all the passengers and cargo are aboard. What are your orders, sir?"

"Tell the mate to draw the gangplank and cast off the lines."

"Aye, sir," the man began to leave when the policeman found his voice.

"But captain, please, I must go ashore. I have a family here."

Roughly the captain said, "Man, you bought into their game. You can't whimper now! Oh, well," he said in a sort of exasperation, "let this man go. If he says anything, we'll say he shot Bull. I would suggest, sir, that in your report, you just indicate that the prison guard took passage on the *Elgin* to Sydney to look further for his prisoner there."

The man tried to thank the busy captain. He was dismissed with a careless wave. Mr. Harrington now washed the wound on Bull's head, applied an unguent to the lacerated skin, then opened a corked bottle of ammonia and placed it under the broad, flattened nose.

Bull jerked to consciousness, tried to rise and then momentarily fell back. He then rolled on his side and sat groggily up. He shook his head and then waited for the pain to recede. Finally, he stood up, his hand gently touching the wound on his head.

"You are all under arrest here," he grated. "You know my authority, captain, and you have chosen to ignore an order of the courts. You will be charged with attempted murder. I can promise you that you will never step foot on the deck of this ship again."

There was a sudden movement of the ship. Bull's eyes widened, he staggered over to the porthole, glanced out, then turned back to the captain with disbelief. "You have cast off!"

"True!" said the captain calmly, "and now you will spend the

voyage in the brig for shooting off firearms in my quarters." He turned to Rusty. "Call in two seamen and assist this man below decks to his new quarters. See that he is safe and secure before you return to your duties."

Rusty saluted, "Aye, aye, sir!"

Kurt and Aluk were given the same cabin that Kurt had shared with the Reverend Charles Stuart many months before. During the first two days of sailing, he and Aluk were fitted with clothes for their entry into Sydney. Val felt that Kurt should assist with the stage settings. Aluk would appropriately appear as a blackamoor from Spain in a silent part. "This way," explained Mary, "we can disguise you properly until your hearing."

"I am so interested in what you are doing, Kurt. I wish that I could go with you to the hearing. But I know that you will give a magnificent performance—and that you will win the cause for those poor aborigines."

He looked at her consideringly. She was an enchantress—but was she that with all men? The thought was revolting to him. Then she smiled and it seemed so intimate! Yes, she was—practised—at enticing. Yes, and rejecting, too, but in such a way that he was left feeling that the next time would be the right time for them both.

His thoughts were brought back to the present with a jolt. ". . . tonight?" What could have gone before?

She laughed delightedly at his bemusement, "I said, that tonight I have made arrangements for us both to have dinner in my rooms. Can you manage to be there?"

"Yes, my pretty. I can manage."

Gracefully she touched his arm and her lips formed a kiss. She walked gracefully to the door saying, "I will expect you at seven, then."

Kurt was exuberant as he tapped lightly on Mary's door, then, hearing her trilling laughter, realized that she was not alone. He rapped louder and the door was finally opened. His tentative smile faded, for he was looking down into the weatherbeaten face of the captain. He could also see Val leaning against a table. The captain's voice was jovial, "Why so glum, Bolin?" He gave a deep chuckle as he motioned Kurt

into the room. Mary rose from her seat gracefully and Val came with her to extend his hand in welcome.

"Have I missed a bit of humor?" she asked as she smiled up into Kurt's eyes. As he took her small delicate hand in his, his face broke into a handsome smile. Harrington and Val exchanged looks, for men without number, including princes and kings paid homage to this lovely woman.

"Come sit with us," Mary invited as she stretched out on the couch and patted the seat beside her.

"Yes, at twenty-one our little Mary was already famous." Val gave the actress an intimate look as he continued. "Her reputation on the stage at that time was as bright as Sarah Siddons. Her Viola was delectable. Her Portia was inspiring, and her Cordelia movingly tragic. The old king, George the Third, who generally disliked Shakespeare, became her ardent admirer—and sponsor." He laughed into her eyes, and she prettily blushed, her eyes sparkling as she acknowledged yet again this oft-told recital of her accomplishments.

Servants brought their meal and the party dined in leisure. Kurt listened quietly to the talk as they ate, feeling somewhat awkward, for it had been long since he had sat at such a civilized table.

At last Mary suppressed a yawn, and Val, knowing this familiar cue, rose and apologised for the lateness of the hour. The captain and Kurt also rose and mumbled their goodnights. Kurt hoped that she would invite him to linger after the others had gone, but nothing was offered. He followed the others into the corridor.

Mary smiled as she thought of the longing look in the young man's eyes. Her smile faded as she remembered how she had saved him from the bestial prison guard. She was intrigued with his cause, and he was very pleasant, of course. Her lips curled with malice as she thought of his feelings. She had been married at fifteen, and it had gone well for a few weeks, and then it had turned bad. Her husband was now a virtual stranger, living somewhere in Europe. Since then she had had many lovers, including a king.

She walked into the bedroom of her suite, thinking of young Kurt's strength. Though young, he had experience and intelligence. His ankles and wrists showed the scars of shackles, his

face reflected the strains of torture and brutality. Still he had a look of—excitement that was younger than his years. A curl of excitement and anticipation rose within her. She would be kind again.

She sat down at her dressing table with a little sigh of weariness. It was getting more difficult to keep up the fresh enthusiasm required for her kind of life. She had repeated every experience too many times. Val had spoken of her as being twenty-one, but in actuality she had been closer to thirty then, and that had been at least fifteen years ago. She leaned forward to study her reflection in the mirror. The yellow light from the lamp softened the small lines around her eyes and mouth. She shook lotion from a bottle and gently worked it into her neck and then up into her face. She practised a smile with various expressions. It was one of the facile trademarks that had made her famous. As long as men such as young Bolin found her attractive, she still had a few more years of her career. Young actresses were always pushing their way up, trying to preempt the stars. She needed Val—and the young king—to keep top billing in the theatre program.

She stood up and dropped her silk robe to the floor, slipped daintily between the sheets. She lay on her back with her hands behind her head. The ship's lantern outside the window swayed with the movement of the vessel and she could hear the rocking of the masts and the splash of the seas against the ship's sides.

Her thoughts turned gently to the first time she had seen the young lad with the glossy chestnut hair. Strange that he had remained vivid in her memory for all these years. But then she had been young, vulnerable and sympathetic, and besides it had been the opening night of her performance at the Royal Theatre. King George and Queen Charlotte had attended with their sons. She laughed softly now to herself as she recalled that the young royal prince had objected strenuously and only stern measures had brought him. But when she had appeared upon the stage, he had very nearly disrupted the show by leaning over his box and saying so that she could hear, "By God—ravishing!" Though that young man was given to fits of temper, and sudden bursts of weeping, she had met his demands of her, and truth to tell, he had indeed furthered her

career. She stirred restlessly as she remembered the last time she had been summoned to attend him. She had entered his bedchamber, and he had arrogantly dismissed his staff. His hair was wild and his face blotched crimson from his fierce crying. He had snatched at her hand and drawn her onto the bed beside him. His wet slobbering lips had quivered against her throat. By morning she left him in quiet slumber. Mary shuddered faintly at the memory of that night.

She now wondered if she had been foolish to have taken this extended trip to Australia. She had desperately needed the rest, and Val had encouraged her, but it meant that she would be absent from the king for well over a year. She sat up in bed and then slid her feet into satin slippers. She put on her velvet robe against the chill of the evening. Sleep was evading her now, and her thoughts were disturbing. Would she be forgotten after such absence? The thought brought her to full wakefulness.

She began to walk the floor. Val would likely be her agent only so long as she drew crowds. She went to the window, her eyes searching the shadows outside for an answer. The dark horizon now was sharply etched between the sea and the sky, and moonbeams played upon the giant lifting waves. Suddenly her hand went to her lips to stifle a cry as the body of a man went hurtling by. She heard a cry of terror as he disappeared into the surging waters below. Mary turned and ran into the corridor, her eyes desperately searching for someone to help. The corridor was empty, and she closed her door again. She knew it had not been a dream, and her thoughts went back to the sailor she had heard just that afternoon as he had crossed himself, muttering that the great white sharks following them always knew when death was near.

Unsteadily she rose and went to her bedroom and pulled a thick woolen dress over her head. She must find someone, tell of a man's death. She heard a faint sound from her sitting room that brought terror to her overwrought nerves. She caught a movement against the wall, and her eyes widened with sheer terror when she recognized the prison guard. His face was all but hidden behind a filthy beard, his clothes were torn and soiled. He was rubbing his chafed wrists, as he looked at her

blankly, though with a look of lust, of victory in his face. She knew that what she saw was a total loss of sanity, and he was now an animal.

She fell to the floor in a dead faint, the name as she fell coming as a scream that died away, "Kurt . . ."

Kurt bid Val and the captain goodnight, though he felt restless. The evening had been enjoyable, but certainly not as he expected. He had enjoyed Mary's renditions of various scenes she had played in different theatres. Val had played the opposing parts with her. Yes, the lady surely had talent.

He stretched his arms above his head, letting his eyes follow the pattern of the masthead as it swayed in a rhythm across the skies as the ship rolled against the wind in the starboard quarter.

"'Ave a rest 'ere, mate," hissed a voice in his ear. Kurt jerked away from a knife point as its point pricked his skin at his back.

"One more move will be your last," continued the rasping voice. "And keep your chaffer closed."

Kurt breathed the single word explosively, "Rusty."

"Right, mate, only it's your old friend Joxer wot knew you at Bridewell prison. It should also pleasure you to know that old Bull is wit' ye're girl friend."

Kurt knew that Joxer would thrust the knife deep into his back. He twisted sideways as he dropped to the deck. He turned over with his feet doubled up, ready to meet the challenger he saw the sailor's form suddenly arch backwards as a dark arm encircled his neck. A cry of agony escaped his lips as he was tossed over the ship's rail into the boiling waters below.

Kurt had thrown up his own arm and yelled for Aluk to stop, but it had all happened so fast that the man was overboard before the abo turned to Kurt with a wide smile, waiting for approval.

Kurt thought of Mary and ran swiftly to her cabin. He rushed the door, using his big shoulder as a battering ram. It gave way, the wood splintering as it crashed onto the floor. Kurt stumbled to his knees, but before he could get to his feet, a heavy chair crashed on his shoulders. He saw Bull holding

onto a thick chair leg. As he raised it, Kurt dove straight at the man's ribs. He heard them snap, and his headlong charge drove Bull backwards where he tripped over the shattered door, to fall gasping for breath.

Aluk stepped close and put his spear against the gasping man's throat, asking for permission to end the fight in this way.

The captain shouldered his way in, "Good God, what's going on here?"

Kurt pushed his way past to look for Mary. She was unconscious.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

This was their second day in Sydney. The first had been spent visiting the barber, the baths, and the tailor. They'd had to find lodgings as well, and the captain had warned Kurt and Aluk to stay close together for protection from the roaming thugs and pickpockets.

This morning Kurt left Aluk in their second-floor room. It faced King Street across Queen's Square from the new Saint James Church. As he passed the church, he noticed people entering the building with heads bowed, seeking a God who was unmindful of them, he thought cynically . . . if there is a God at all. He walked on toward Parliament House on MacQuarrie Street, which had been named after Governor Lachlan MacQuarrie who had been in office for twelve years. During that time he'd found an outstanding architect among the convicts. Francis Greenway had designed Saint James and many other beautiful buildings. He'd received a full pardon because of this contribution to the city.

Kurt stretched his strides as he walked along, enjoying the summer heat and thinking that this was indeed a good land and one of opportunity . . . even for a convict. It was winter in

London right now, and the coal smoke would be oppressive with cold fog and snow. But here, the flowers were growing in profusion, and the jacaranda trees were dropping their lovely purple blossoms to carpet the green lawns below. He breathed deep of the fragrant smell of gum trees in the heated air.

He ran up the steps of Parliament House but stayed there only long enough to be told that the Governor was out, inspecting the gaol. Kurt began to feel frustrated. It would soon be too late to help the Tasmanian aborigines if someone in authority did not listen soon. Brusquely he asked for an afternoon appointment. "The governor's time is fully taken, but if you want to wait, I will try to fit you in" a secretary told him.

"I'll be here." After several hours wait, Kurt was informed, with a degree of sympathy, that the governor had left for the day, and that he would be at the theatre that night to see Mary Robinson play *Perdita*.

It was a few minutes before curtain time, and in the orchestra pit members of the band were tuning up. The audience was being seated in the pit, benches and loges, laughing and talking as they peeled oranges sold by aproned girls. A smell of rum and candle smoke, permeated the air. In the more fashionable loges and boxes the modishly dressed ladies and gentlemen in their satins, velvets and lace strutted and gossiped as they sniffed their snuff and waved elegant white fingers. The theatre was packed.

Mary Robinson was still in her dressing room entertaining the city's social elite, under Val's watchful eye. All held a glass in their hands. "To *Perdita*, gentlemen," Val said, and every glass raised.

Kurt stood in the wings, dressed in his newly tailored clothes. Aluk, costumed as a stagehand, was nearby. He chuckled softly as Kurt's fingers pulled at his neck to ease the tight collar.

A hand came down on Kurt's shoulder, "Has the governor arrived yet?" Val asked.

"Just now!"

"That's not MacQuarrie. It's his lieutenant. I'll make some inquiries."

As Val disappeared, Aluk whispered, "There is trouble?"

Kurt's voice was strained. "Val has gone to see why the governor is not here. He planned to introduce us and set up a hearing for your people."

Val reappeared, looking unhappy. "The Governor is leaving for Melbourne tonight—an emergency. Sorry. However, if you hurry, you might see him tonight before he leaves. The lieutenant-governor has a bad reputation—a libertine with no respect from his constituency. I cannot leave the theatre right now, but I think you can find your way."

"I will." Kurt motioned to Aluk and they made their way to the street. Carriages and horses lined the road, their handlers talking and playing cards.

Kurt asked several men about a hack, but they all seemed to be privately owned. "Sorry, mate. Ye'll have to walk. There's no rentals available on first nights."

It was more than an hour's walk to the governor's home but they made good time. A footman answered the door. "Mr. MacQuarrie is half an hour along the road with the best horseflesh in New South Wales." Kurt and Aluk turned away in keen disappointment to begin their long trek back.

It was dark when they reached their lodgings. As they approached their room, they saw the shadow of a man cross before the window. They stepped back, silent, searching the darkness.

Aluk disappeared for a moment then spoke in a mere breath of a whisper, "There is no one ahead." Silently the two men made their way up the stairs with the drawn knives in hand, listening intently.

Kurt twisted the doorknob and they dived into the room. He threw his arms around the intruder and dumped him onto the bed. Aluk's arm, like a deadly snake, encircled the man's neck. "Kurt . . . it's me, Elijah," croaked a familiar voice.

Kurt laughed as he rolled away. A voice shouted, "Wat the bloody 'ells goin' on 'ere?"

Kurt shouted, "Too much rum in my friend. There'll be no more noise."

Kurt slapped Elijah on the shoulder and happily asked how he had found them.

"I received my pardon and my land. I want you to see my station. Oh, it's not much now, but it will be one day. Now I

raise sheep, merinos, and I'm making some money. I always hoped I'd see you one day and you'd come to share it with me. But you say you've escaped—and that means you're a hunted man. I can understand your wanting to help your aborigine friends, but your safety must surely come first. Come with me to the outback where you'll be safe."

"I'd love to see it, but I have certain responsibilities. Now we must get some sleep so we can face the day tomorrow."

At a hasty breakfast the next morning. Elijah told Aluk, "our friend here has become a legend." As Kurt's eyebrows rose in surprise he continued, "Oh yes, Bolin, Billy Moses told many about you. Your name is respected widely."

The three men spotted Val, as he came into the dining room. He was all smiles. "I was also able to get an appointment with the lieutenant-governor. Come along Kurt, my carriage is waiting."

"Aluk, you and Elijah come along. You can wait in the carriage."

Val and Kurt waited for two hours. Their appointment lasted less than ten minutes. Kurt explained the problems of the Tasmanian aborigines and the edict for their extermination. With a raised hand, the lieutenant cut him off in mid-sentence.

"I am already well aware of the situation. Steps are now being taken to assure the safety of these people," he said coldly, and then looked down at his papers in dismissal.

Kurt was in a high temper as they left. "He's a fraud, Val," he said angrily. "He's lying. Nothing is being done for those people. Isn't there anyone else we can see?"

Val considered a moment, "We'll stop by the governor's office and talk to his personal aide." When they arrived there, the man was courteous and listened to Kurt's impassioned plea.

"Gentlemen," he said at last, "A clergyman and his staff have recently sailed for Tasmania with authority to investigate and bring help. He is ordered to report back. Mr. MacQuarrie has already heard of the atrocities and the prison warden has been ordered here immediately. I expect him any moment now. In any case, this indiscriminate killing of the natives has been ordered stopped.

The two men were satisfied and they started toward the

door. They must not be seen by the warden who would recognize Kurt, who had a murder charge outstanding against him.

Val said worriedly, "Bolin, you must stay out of sight. If you are recognized, you could be hung within twenty-four hours. Our ship sails for England in a week. Do you think you can stay out of sight for that long?"

"Kurt, you'll get to see my station after all—and you, too, Aluk," said Elijah happily. "I have my wagon all loaded with staples at the stables. We'll pick up the rest of the gear on the way out."

Val's voice was thoughtful, "Perhaps it would be better if I check you both out of that hotel. It's not unlikely that the warden will stay there. I'll bring your things to the stables. He extended his hand to Kurt, "Good luck, and remember the ship sails on the early morning tide in eight days. We'll expect you an hour before daybreak." He waved a languid hand to the driver who clucked his team to an ambling trot.

Elijah and Kurt rode on the wagon seat, and Aluk perched on the tailgate. The abo now wore only his breechcloth and a headband. Somewhere he had acquired a spear and a good boomerang. The heat was oppressive and dirt rose from the road in a fine dust. It irritated their eyes, dried their mouths, and coated their faces and clothes. Elijah's voice was cheerful, "The road hardens up in a mile or so, and we might even get a nice little breeze to clear the air."

He was right. Within an hour they were on a less-traveled road and Kurt could see the vivid colors of the countryside; the deep purple of the jacarandas, the red hibiscus and the creamy frangipani. He heard the constant shrill hum of cicada in the afternoon heat, and he saw a kookaburra dart after its prey with harsh laughter.

"Some of us call him a laughing jackass," Elijah said quietly, not wanting to disturb Kurt's evident enjoyment of this warm and quiet world. Suddenly there was a whirr of many wings and hundreds of small blue-green birds flashed by. Kurt turned to watch them as they settled into nearby trees. "It's a good land, a new land, lad—just waiting to give us life and sustenance if we give it our life and care."

Kurt's eyes went to his friend, "Yes, it looks welcoming, good and gentle."

Elijah's eyes flashed with pleasure. "By noontime we will pass through Sir Harold MacQuarrie's station. He is a cousin of the governor and a favorite of King George. He serves on various government committees. He's also my closest neighbor, and a good one. He owns many hundreds of thousands of acres where I have five thousand. I doubt if he could count the number of cattle and sheep on his place. He's a very wealthy man, and one that you'll like."

Kurt had spent too many years trying merely to survive to relax his instincts now. "You say he was a favorite of the king, how does he stand with the son, George the Fourth?"

Elijah scratched his chin, and Kurt noticed the thin fingers were burned almost black with the sun and weather. "I don't rightly know. I've heard that Sir Harold has spoken openly against the system of shipping English convicts to this new land. He has stood up for the likes of you and me. All of the important travelers from England have been guests at his station. Yes, he's an important man, you can be sure of that."

"Is there any way that we can avoid his land?" Kurt asked thoughtfully.

"No lad, it's the only road, but have no fear. I'll just tell him that ye're part of the Mary Robinson company wanting to see the outback. He'll accept my word. Cheer up. This is a holiday for both you and Aluk. Enjoy yourself." He glanced back, then exclaimed, "He's gone!"

Kurt smiled, "Don't concern yourself. He's uneasy with people and has been too long on ships and hotels. He's just taken a walkabout. He'll not lose us."

Elijah pointed off to the side, "A kangaroo sitting on her haunches and she's got a little joey," he exclaimed softly with pleasure. As the wagon moved forward, Kurt could see her baby nestling in her pouch. It peered with soft dark eyes at the world from the safety of his mother's tummy.

They began to climb a steep rise and the road seemed impossible, but the horses had been raised in rough country and knew how to keep their feet. They topped the incline, then dipped down and around a sharp curve to a dry streambed.

Suddenly a man jumped from cover onto the wagon and rammed a gun into Elijah's back.

"Bail up, damm'ee, or I'll cut ye in two." Three more men rode out from behind trees, and the biggest seemed to dwarf the horse he rode.

"All right, Monkey. I've got them covered. Go bring the horses. Now you just drive on slowly down into that wash. You know what this blunderbuss can do, so you just stay calm and aisy and do what you're told."

Elijah pulled his team to a stop as Monkey led out three horses. An old abo followed. His hands were tied behind his back and a noose circled his neck. A young aborigine girl with iron shackles on her wrists followed. Her head had been shaved with a knife, and not carefully either. There were cuts and dried blood stains. She wore only a ragged, short cloth skirt, and had obviously been dragged along the ground. There were also raw-looking burn marks on her body and thrusting young breasts.

Kurt recognized the look in the leader's eyes, and knew they would be killed and dumped. He braced himself for the confrontation as he faced the outlaws.

Monkey ordered the abo captive to unpack the supplies in the wagon. At that moment, Kurt leaped forward onto the rump of the nearest horse. The blast of a gun echoed, then he heard a scream of pain as the animal reared up, pawing the air with its front hooves. Kurt rolled to one side, grasping the nearest mounted man, and dragging him to the ground under the frantic animal's feet. Elijah crashed on top of the other villain and had knocked him to the ground.

Kurt rose with a foot on his man's back and saw Monkey with his arms stretched toward the sky, Elijah had his man pinned to the ground and the abo slipped out of the noose and roughly put it around Monkey's neck and jerked it tight.

The outlaw leader had been knocked to the ground by a native spear which had gone all the way through his body. Aluk came striding down the embankment, causing his horse to bolt, dragging the dying man off in the brush behind him.

The aborigine glanced about the group, his eyes pausing a

moment on the young girl as she came tremblingly out of the brush, then he ran off to retrieve his spear.

Just past noon, Elijah drove his team up to the gate of Sir Harold MacQuarrie's big country home. The prisoners were tied behind, and the two aborigine men guarded them. The girl rode atop the load. The extra horses had been stripped of their gear and were placidly following along behind, stopping occasionally to eat beside the road.

They pulled into a side corral and the abos found their prisoners shade near a billabong. Elijah and Kurt then walked up the slight incline to the house, Kurt didn't try to hide his amazement at the luxury and wealth evident in this home so far out in the countryside. Elijah gestured almost possessively, as he pointed out the home pasture, the horse paddock and the wool shed. "There's about twelve-hundred acres, I guess," he said. "And Mr. MacQuarrie is a man of importance. I've seen him use the cat on a rapist and then ordered him hung." Elijah's face sobered, "But he's fair, I'll say that. This is a harsh land and law must be enforced or there'd be no safety for anyone. This country is crawling with that kind of scum." He pointed back at their captives. "It takes men like Sir Harold to make something of this land."

"There's room for three hundred sheep under this shed. If it rains during the night, the men will still have work ahead. You can't shear a wet animal. They have sorting tables and divided cribs for the different fleeces. The wool is pressed, packed and stored ready for the drays to take it to market."

"How much are shearers paid?" Kurt wanted to know.

"Well, they furnish their own food from the storekeeper who has quarters at the rear of the house. Food costs them about six shillings a week and they earn as much daily."

As they neared the spacious veranda of the mansion, Elijah stepped forward to be met with a warm smile and handshake by Mr. MacQuarrie who then turned to greet Kurt. He ordered refreshment for the two men and food and drink for those waiting by the billabong.

"Welcome, both of you. We get all too few visitors out here."

"You have a magnificent estate, sir," Kurt said, looking out over the vast and distant wall of scrub.

"Yes, Yantumara, falling star, to a pommy, is a fair enough home for any man. However I miss my friends at court and my club. My niece is returning to England soon and then I'll be alone here. I've been considering returning for a visit. Elijah tell me of your encounter with the bushrangers. We'd best dispose of that before teatime."

Elijah told about their encounter.

Sir Harold reacted explosively. "British law cannot look with tolerance on such cutthroats. Criminals are turned loose on us. It means we must hunt down these outlaws relentlessly. This is a good land and will be good for families—when we control this lawlessness."

Kurt felt his face flush as Sir Harold's eyes came to rest on his scarred wrists, then he relaxed as the landowner's attention returned to Elijah, "Of course it's right when men like you, Elijah, serve their time and sensibly receive their pardon and their land. But enough of this kind of talk. Let us see to your prisoners."

"Vincent," he called out, "bushrangers took on these friends of mine. Take some men and fetch them from the billabong near the shed."

The man nodded and left, patting a pistol at his belt and slapping at his boots with the stockman's whip in his hand.

"Having captured these men, you are entitled to a reward. Or, if you wish, you can put them in service at your station. My recommendation is that you take the reward and let them hang. Highway robbery finds no sympathy in any country," said MacQuarrie forcefully.

Vincent returned with the three prisoners quickly, followed by Aluk and the other two aborigines.

"What have we here, Elijah? Why are these abos in your party?" Sir Harold asked.

"The older man and the girl were captives of the bushrangers. Aluk has accompanied Kurt from Tasmania. He can be credited with saving our lives, for he killed their leader."

"An abo—killing a white man—that could be trouble, real trouble. But more of that later. I am curious, Mr. Bolin, as to why this native of yours left his territory!"

Vincent's voice interrupted, "What orders about the bushrangers, sir?"

"Line them up and let me take a look."

The three men shuffled forward with their hands tied behind their back. Sir Harold cleared his throat, and said, "British Law prescribes the death penalty as punishment for sedition, murder, piracy, highway robbery, forgery, and counterfeiting. Are you men guilty of any of these crimes?" He pointed his finger at Monkey, "How do you plead?"

The big man dropped to his knees. "Your honor, our leader that was killed. It was he what made us escape the prison camp. It was the knife across the throat or do as we were told." Tears ran down dirty cheeks as his two mates confirmed his story.

"Three able men—afraid of one?" Sir Harold's voice was contemptuous.

"Please sir, how could we stand up to a madman, especially one who was so much bigger and had the strength of the very devil himself."

Sir Harold turned to Vincent, "Do you want to give these men a week's trial to see if they are worth saving from the gallows?"

"It's as you wish, sir. I can hang them or work them, but before the week's out, they may wish they were dead."

"Elijah, these men may be good workers. I can take them off your hands and give you one of my prize rams and ten head of my best ewes. Would you be interested?"

Elijah's jaw dropped and his eyes grew large at the prospect of actually owning some of Sir Harold's sheep—it was the fulfillment of a dream. He agreed enthusiastically.

"Now that's settled, Vincent, take these three men down and bind them. I will leave their flogging to your discretion, keeping in mind that they must be fit for work." Sir Harold turned to look at the natives. "Also find clothes for the girl and see that they are fed and cared for. He then gazed at Aluk for a long moment and then he asked Elijah, "Has this man been fed?"

"Yes, I have eaten, thank you."

Surprise showed on Sir Harold's face. "An abo that speaks English?"

"We are wards of the king, and it is right that we speak his tongue."

"Young man, how did you leave Tasmania?"

"My name is Aluk, sir, and this man, Kurt Bolin, brought me on a ship. We need his help to save my people."

"Follow Vincent, he will see that you get quarters. Later I will hear your story. Perhaps I can help, for I have influence in certain circles." The tinkle of a silver bell announced that tea was ready on the veranda for them.

Sir Harold turned and led his guests into the house. His face lit up with pleasure as a fairly tall young woman came through the door. "Ah, my lovely niece."

Kurt thought that she was indeed pretty, and then he became angry. His bitterness was so intense that he seemed incapable of any other feeling. His mind was flooded with the injustices that made him what he was—unworthy to look upon such a woman as this. It was with an effort that he brought his attention back to the girl. Woodenly, he took her hand, and he saw her eyes widen at the sight of the scars on his wrists.

Sir Harold's voice penetrated his anger. "This is Lord Jeffrey's daughter Megan."

The rage was instantly gone and he became aware of the buzzing of the cicadas in the noonday heat.

"Megan, this is Kurt Bolin. He and Elijah have brought in some bushrangers who attacked them. They will be our guests for tea. Will you pour, my dear?"

The girl's face turned ashen. Then she turned and fled into the house.

Kurt stood there, stunned. Lord Jeffrey's daughter? But what was she doing here? Then he heard her voice calling faintly, "Oh come quickly!"

An older woman entered the room. She had dark hair with streaks of gray at the side. Her eyes were wide with a dazed, yet unbelieving, hope. Her lips were trembling as she met her son halfway across the room and gathered him into hungry arms.

"Kurt, my own Kurt," she whispered as the tears ran down her cheeks and her hands moved lovingly over his face. "You are so big! And you have been hurt!" Her fingers had found the scars.

At last as he stood back she drew him to a chair while Megan poured tea and passed small cakes and scones. "Mother, tell me how you come to be here."

"Megan and I have been searching all these years. Lord

Jeffrey gave me employment me as Megan's companion. He is going to be so pleased! Our search has been so long."

Rachel read the years of suffering in her son's face, but now the separation slipped away and they again shared the love that had never faded.

His eyes returned to the girl who had been little Megan. Her eyes crinkled gaily and impudently back at him, just as they had years ago. But now he also saw a woman. Her eyes were of deepest blue, her hair of richest auburn. In fact, he could not detect the smallest fault with her elegantly rounded figure and regal bearing. Megan's eyes danced as she read his thoughts, "Well Humpty-Dumpty, I've seen much of the world."

Kurt felt the confusion of a boy once again. He was grateful when Sir Harold's voice brought him back to reality.

"Now to the future, lad. For you to stay in the territory means almost certain capture and hanging. You must return to London and be cleared. I can take you into my custody."

His mother's voice held a desperate pleading, "But Sir Harold, Kurt is innocent of any crime. He was cleared by Lord Jeffrey right after he was transported."

"Yes, my dear, but he has since been charged with murder." Rachel turned ashen and Megan rose from her chair to put her arms around the distraught woman.

"Surely after all these years they could not take him from my side again."

Sir Harold's voice was comforting. "You can count on my full support, and of course that of my brother, Lord Jeffrey. Still a murder, regardless of the provocation is punishable by death. No one in Australia can be counted on to condone the actions of a convict, especially one involved with native aborigines who have attacked white settlers. No, Kurt would stand no chance at a trial in Sydney. His only possible chance for freedom is to sail to London in my custody."

Kurt's voice was grim. "Even though I am a Jew, sir?"

"That is a problem, of course, your not being a British subject."

Megan's voice was quiet, "... unless he married one, uncle?"

Kurt's eyes found hers. She was not for the likes of him—a hardened convict. No—it was not to be.

Finally their reunion ended and Sir Harold insisted they accept his hospitality. Kurt went to his bed and stretched tiredly, but sleep would not come. Too many thoughts moved through mind. Aluk had saved their lives today, and now his future was in peril—because he was an aborigine. Next week Kurt would board the *Elgin*—in Sir Jeffrey's custody. But he must not think of that. He turned his face to the wall, and at last sleep came, and dreams of lovely Megan.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Kurt from his seat in the courtroom looked up at the wall clock as its soft gong beat out the time. Again his lips formed the Latin inscription on its base, *Tempus rerum imperator*, Time is the ruler of all things. He looked up and saw that the hall was rapidly filling, and his quick eyes searched for his mother—and Megan. They were not there yet, but he was certain that they would be there as always—especially this last day. He glanced at the prosecutor as he entered in his black gown and white wig. He reminded Kurt of a street sparrow, but that was in looks only, for the man had relentlessly built the scaffold that would hang him unless some miracle occurred.

The most damaging Testimony had come from Bull, the prison guard. The prosecutor had made him seem like a model officer in the king's service, and Sir Harold, acting in Kurt's defense, had been unable to shake his testimony.

Help from Lord Jeffrey had not come. He was still in Africa.

Mary Robinson had asserted that she would use her influence with the king, but she had been mistaken. Though he had set her up in a splendid establishment and covered her with

jewels, he had gone to other amours while she was in Australia. Kurt knew that he could expect no help there.

He looked down at the chains on his wrists and ankles. Today was the first time during this trial that he'd been forced to wear them. Certainly, it was a sign that he was considered guilty. He glanced at Sir Harold who was ashen and weary. Though he'd defended Kurt to the best of his ability, he'd not had too much court experience. Kurt had grimly decided that if he was found guilty, he would try to escape. It would be far better to die fighting than to go to the gallows meekly.

Kurt was nudged to his feet, and as he rose, he caught sight of his mother and Megan close together. Their eyes met, and then he turned quickly away. He could not bear the sight of their anguish. His mind followed the young woman, the girl he loved and who loved him. He hungered for her, God knows, but he was still glad that they had not married aboard ship. No, he must not sire a child that would lose his father on the gallows. Yes, that was the right thing. He'd already caused enough pain and heartache. He must not taint her life if he could not come to her honorably as a free man.

The judge took his place behind the bench where a silver cup was filled with fragrant herbs in the hope that it would protect him from disease and plague. He fumbled with papers, adjusted his wig, cast his cold eyes on the gallery and then turned to the prisoner.

"Have you anything to say to this court before the sentence is passed?" he asked.

Kurt rose to ask, "How long may I speak, Your Honor?"

"No more than thirty minutes."

"Thank you. Would you like me to converse in French, Greek or Latin?"

The judge's face flushed with temper, "You will do well to plead your case in English and not indulge further in these theatrics."

Kurt nodded, "And I can use my time in any way best suited to my interests?" The judge nodded his agreement. Megan's knuckles were white as she clenched her hands, hoping that Kurt could somehow win the court's sympathy. He was her man, and in deadly peril. If only papa had come in time. She looked down with dazed eyes as Rachel's hand gripped hers.

Rachel was praying silently, with all her heart. Her father, lying helplessly in bed, had said, "Jewish women don't weep, my child. They fight." He patted her hand, "God will not forsake us. Tell Kurt that I wait for him to come to me a free man. I cannot die peacefully until he does."

Kurt's eyes swept the courtroom while the bailiff unlocked the shackles. Grandfather Roth had taken him to this place as a boy to show him where English justice was meted out. Now he stood in a travesty of that justice.

The judge watched quietly. This man was no common criminal. The prison guard's testimony was false. Sir Harold had been unable to defend the man properly. He stirred restlessly, for he would have to pass judgement on the evidence presented. Even though the old prejudice against Jews was relaxing, he would still have to send the fellow to the gallows. It was a terrible thing!

Kurt moved forward and faced the bench, "Your Honor, part of my time will be used to defend those who cannot defend themselves. Aluk, a black man, has not been allowed to testify. I will give him some of my time."

"I object," said the prosecutor loudly.

"Objection overruled."

Kurt's voice was crisp. "I introduce Aluk. He will speak for himself."

Aluk's plea for his people was moving and to the point. The crowd murmured its approval.

Kurt then took the stand. "Your Honor, I plead for these Australian natives. The order to annihilate them should be rescinded. They, too, are subjects of our king." Kurt glanced around and knew that he had the attention of every person in the room.

"Now, Your Honor, I wish to speak for the men and women sent from this country to serve prison terms in brutal surroundings. Many of them are able to serve their time and are given land to settle the land. Too many, however, die at the hands of brutal men such as he," he pointed his finger at Bull. "Many others kill themselves to escape such treatment. Some are political prisoners, having committed no crime. Others are innocent—as I am. I can prove this when Lord Jeffrey returns."

He quickly removed his coat and unbuttoned his shirt. A gasp went through the audience.

The judge rose from his chair to protest this gross display in his court, but he was stopped at the sight of the huge scars and welts across Kurt's back. He sat down weakly and waited.

Megan glanced at Rachel and was surprised at her calmness. Her eyes went back to Kurt, stunned and aching at the pain he must have suffered. She heard Rachel speak words in Hebrew, and though she did not understand them, understood the mother's pride in her son. Her eyes went back to the man she loved. He had endured so much and yet managed somehow to maintain his gentleness and caring for people. Such brutality would have destroyed most men, but not Kurt. She wanted to run to him and tell him of her love.

His voice rose above the subdued murmur of the crowd, "This is how every prisoner's back looks, Your Honor. There must be reforms in our penal system. Further, the practise of transport be stopped. Men and women should be permitted to serve their terms without degradation, and in dignity.

"One other thing, Your Honor. The practise of slavery must be abolished. If we in England do not lead in this move toward decent humanity, who will? I plead particularly for the humane treatment and care of the aborigines." He turned and made his way back toward his chair but remained standing as he faced the judge.

"All that has transpired has been recorded. The ministers will be sent copies, and they will take what action they deem advisable. Kurt Bolin, are you now ready to hear judgement?"

Kurt nodded.

The judge leaned forward. "You have been charged with murder. Nowhere in your plea have you referred to your own personal problem, nor has your defense presented evidence to the contrary. Indeed, the prosecutor has shown that you did in fact commit such a crime. Admittedly the circumstances have shown that you were acting in self-defense. Still I must act according to the laws of this country."

There was a rustling and excitement throughout the room. Kurt vaguely heard a sob from the gallery.

Suddenly the courtroom doors burst open and a man entered

slowly. He looked at least ten feet tall. It was Byzas! He wore a tall, feathered headpiece and a cloak covered with gold. He walked calmly up the aisle toward Kurt, followed by black slaves leading a donkey burdened with leather packs. A policeman followed, trying desperately to stop this entourage. Byzas picked the man up by his coat and tossed him into a chair then turned and took Kurt in his arms.

The Judge was pounding furiously with his gavel. Byzas turned to him.

"Your Honor," Byzas voice rose, thick with the accent he had in English, your country has long sought trade agreements with Timbuctoo. I, sir, represent that country." He raised his arm and the deep flowing sleeve fell back on his mighty arm, revealing gold and silver bracelets inset with all manner of precious stones.

"You say you are an ambassador. We all know that England wishes trade with Timbuctoo, but this is neither the time nor the place to discuss such things."

"My boat leaves on the evening tide. Either I have a trade agreement with England before then or my ship will be welcomed in Spain."

"But I am in the midst of conducting a trial and pronouncing sentence."

"This man, Your Honor, should be the English representative in Timbuctoo. He has been there and knows the customs and language."

"He is not an English citizen, so he cannot represent this nation," the judge replied indignantly.

Byzas pulled a gem-studded knife from his belt and turned to the donkey nearby, dramatically slitting one of the packs. He gave Kurt a wicked smile as the crowd gasped when golden coins cascaded onto the floor. He cupped his hands and dumped the treasure onto the judge's table.

"This man was born on English soil. Here is many times the fee to pay for his citizenship. Your king is no more a man of God than you or I, Your Honor. We all have our own faith, be it Quakers, Christians, Catholics, Jews, or Moslims. Please quickly consult with your ministers. Otherwise, I go to Spain."

Rachel and Megan hurried to Kurt's side. He put his arm

around each and they all turned to Byzas and gripped his hands in theirs.

Mother . . . Megan, this is my friend Byzas."

"I have heard much of Kurt's mother. I brought him a beautiful slave girl, but I can see that he will not want her now." His eyes twinkled at Megan.

There was hardly a sound as Big Ben sounded the half hour, and the judge's door opened to admit the judge, accompanied by several ministers and the king! A clerk came forward to write as Byzas and the king conferred. An agreement was completed and quickly signed.

Another paper prepared—a full pardon! The king took a feathered quill pen into his hand and with a flourish, signed it. "Mr. Ambassador, we will have further discussion as to your duties when you are ready to assume your responsibilities." He did not return Kurt's smile, but glanced at the coins and marched out of the room with his ministers following.

Kurt read the paper. "I, King George IV of England do hereby pardon fully Kurt Bolin of any charges brought against him. Further, as of this date he is assigned to the post of Ambassador to Timbuctoo."

Kurt glanced up, his eyes meeting those of Lord Jeffrey. So Megan's father had finally returned.

Byzas' big arm came across his shoulder and the Greek's voice boomed in his ear. "Come with me, little Jew, to my ship. There I can also give to you your share of our treasure."

Kurt nodded.

The sight of the two big men and the courtroom scene had spread like wildfire through the streets of London. Small boys gathered to follow the entourage. One, braver than the rest, ran up to Byzas and clutched a piece of his brilliant cloak.

Byzas looked down, never losing stride with Kurt, and as the boy breathlessly gasped "What's your name, mister?" he ruffled the boy's hair and replied, "My name means nothing to you, lad, but he is Kurt Bolin. Remember that name, boy—Bolin!"

The child dashed back to his friends. "Kurt Bolin—that's the name—Bolin—Bolin." The others caught up the cry, and as they moved along, the name moved from lip to lip. A

policeman with an amused smile saluted as they passed, and old people craned to see what it was about.

The deep sounding gong of Big Ben tolled out the hour of noon. Kurt looked at his friend. There were all too few hours to hear what had brought him here at this crucial time.

Chapter Sixty

Byzas had sailed on the outgoing tide. He had concluded another meeting with the king. Kurt had unanimously been approved as the Ambassador to Timbuctoo. Now he walked his mother home. She clung to his arm as though never to let him from her sight again.

As they walked through Lord Jeffrey's entry gates, he saw there was a new watchman. The man touched the bill of his cap and smiled at Rachel, then his eyes went to the big man at her side.

"My son," she pronounced proudly, but Kurt was looking at the large house that loomed against the evening sky. Rachel saw his eyes go to stables.

"Mr. Brewster, mama?"

"He has been retired for a few years, Kurt, and a new stable master has taken over."

Kurt wondered what his life would have been had he not been arrested. Perhaps he would have become the master. All the faraway places that he'd been, and the people he'd met would have never been. His thoughts went to Aluk, hoping that Megan had brought him here and had made him comfort-

able. His thoughts touched on Africa and little Tamarji—his first step into manhood. He looked around him in the dusk, deciding that this new feeling of stature would probably never have come except for his experiences of those last years.

Rachel felt his step quicken as he caught sight of the little dwelling nestled among the trees. It seemed his childhood home had shrunk. With a wry smile he gradually realized that his own growth accounted for the change. He ducked his head as he went through the door. He paused and looked around—it was all the same—smells, furniture, even the unfinished portrait on the easel.

“Now maybe you can sit still long enough for me to finish it,” Rachel said softly.

From the room nearby he heard, “Is that you, my child?”

“Wait for me a moment, Kurt.” Rachel’s skirts swished as she hurried to the bedroom, leaving a faint fragrance behind her. He looked around, eagerly taking in every familiar detail. Suddenly a shadow seemed to darken his pleasure, for now he must face his grandfather with the knowledge that he had not kept the faith—and the old man would know.

He turned as his mother came to the door and nodded and her hand came out to him, “He is so anxious to see you, my son.”

A small lamp was burning near the bed and his grandfather was leaning on one elbow with his hand extended toward him. Kurt dropped to his knees and held the frail figure in his arms.

The old man’s voice was feeble, shaking with emotion, “My grandson, let me feast my eyes on you.” His clawlike hand touched Kurt’s face. “My boy, you have a remarkable likeness to your father. It is as though he has come home from the sea. I see you have had much pain and suffering. I want to hear every detail in the days ahead.” He chuckled softly, “It will be as it was long ago, only this time you will take me by the hand and help me see your experiences and travels.” He closed his eyes for a moment to rest.

Rachel’s voice was brisk, “Talk no more tonight father. Kurt will be home for awhile, and you two can talk by the hour.” She laughed with pleasure at the thought of her son under her roof again.

“There is time for both of you, but my time is short. I have

clung to the thread of life only that I may see him on his return. I want to hear his faith in Jehovah and to give him his inheritance and trust."

Kurt shifted his weight uneasily on his knees, then said quietly, "Grandfather, all that you told me is true, and as long as I kept those thoughts before me, I was well. But there were times . . ." His voice failed him as he saw the flicker of pain in the sunken eyes.

The old fingers clutched Kurt's arm, "That is not uncommon, my son, but now that you have been brought home to your mother and me, how do you feel about Jehovah?"

Kurt looked deeply into his grandfathers eyes, and he saw the burning anxiety. "My faith is stronger than ever."

"Do you love and fear God?"

"I love and fear God."

"Do you bear hatred toward any man?"

Kurt pondered a moment, then suddenly with a sense of release, of freedom, he knew that he no longer held thoughts of revenge. "No, grandfather, I hold no hatred against any man."

The old man looked at Rachel and said, "I am content, my daughter. Bring me the sword." As Rachel left the room, he turned his eyes toward Kurt, his eyes burning with pride, and then he reached out his hand as Esther placed the jewel-encrusted sword in his hand. "My boy, this is the sword used by Solomon ben Adhem to protect Esther, ancestress. Kurtsev Bolinski used it to save her again from the Russian, Count Dolgorsky. Scotty Bolinski used it against pirates—each generation has used it for freedom and the good of his people. But you know the story, for I have told it many times. Your father left it for you. I think he may have sensed that he would not return from his last trip. Since you have gone, it has hung naked in our house. Now it is for you to sheathe it." The old fingers gently went over the Hebrew inscription. Next Year In Jerusalem. "Now, my son, it is rightfully yours as well as the charges that go with it."

The sound of iron-shod hooves sounded loud on the cobbled lane before the house. "Anyone home?" called the light laughing voice of Megan.

"Go, my son," the old man said with a smile. "The future calls out to you."

Kurt touched the old hand and then rose to his feet. He gave his mother a quick kiss on her cheek and turned eagerly toward the door. With a smile on his face, he strode out of the room, not glancing back. All his thoughts were now with the girl waiting in the warm purple dusk as the half moon rose gently above the towering trees.

Rachel went to the window and watched, content, as Kurt reached to grasp the girl's hand in his. He turned and jumped easily into the saddle with her, then they cantered across the parkland toward the river.

LEGACIES OF PASSION AND PRIDE...

Russia, 1708. Towering, red-haired Kurtsev Bolinsky was locked within a count's torture chamber when he heard a woman screaming. With the strength born of desperation, he burst from his cage and escaped with his future wife, Esther. Thus, the 50-year family saga began.

Now branded traitors to Peter the Great, the family's generational journey took them from Africa to Australia, over pirated waters and burning sands, and through desires of the flesh and the soul.

Legacies of pride were handed down from father to son, and through it all, their passionate quest was sustained by hearty courage, robust love, and family strength....

